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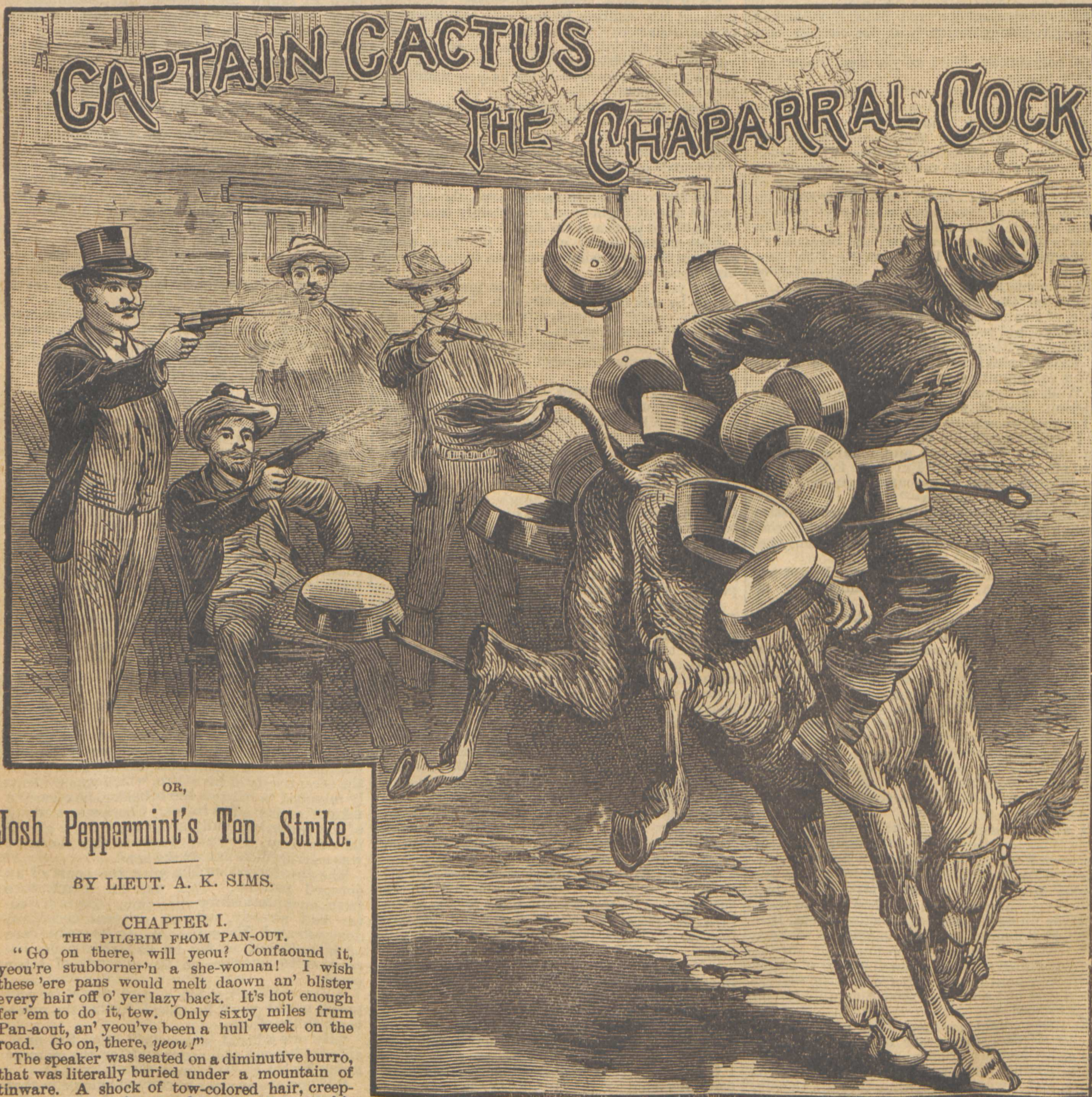
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OR,
Josh Peppermint's Ten Strike.

BY LIEUT. A. K. SIMS.

CHAPTER I.

THE PILGRIM FROM PAN-OUT.

"Go on there, will yeou? Confound it, yeou're stubborn'n a she-woman! I wish these 'ere pans would melt daown an' blister every hair off o' yer lazy back. It's hot enough fer 'em to do it, tew. Only sixty miles from Pan-aout, an' yeou've been a hull week on the road. Go on, there, yeou!"

The speaker was seated on a diminutive burro, that was literally buried under a mountain of tinware. A shock of tow-colored hair, creeping from beneath a seedy hat, fell upon his neck and clung about his sweaty brow. His

WHILE THE BURRO WAS PITCHING, THE TIN PANS FLYING, AND THE BULLETS WHISTLING THROUGH THE AIR, SOLOMON DREW A REVOLVER AND DEFTLY SENT A SHOT THROUGH THE PEAK OF PEPPERMINT'S HAT.

clothing was ill-fitting and coarse; and between the trousers and the rims of woolen half-hose that peeped above his heavy shoes, twin circles of white skin were visible. In addition he was tall and gaunt and with such length of limb that his feet dragged the scanty sage-brush which lined the trail.

Notwithstanding, there was something attractive in his fresh, almost boyish face and twinkling blue eyes; and, as he plied the whip with renewed vigor, a half-smile wreathed his thin lips.

Goaded on by whip and voice, the burro broke into an ambling trot, that made the tin-ware rattle furiously and soon carried it into the main street of the straggling mining town known as Sierra City.

"Whoa! Dew yeou want tew knock all the sodder aout o' these pans? Yeou're the peskiest critter I've struck sence I left old Varmount! Been a hull week comin' frum Pan-aout an' I couldn't git yeou aout of a walk; naow yeou're tryin' to run away. Whoa, I say!"

"Stop that cyclone!" shouted some one, from the rocky sidewalk.

But the "cylone" had stopped, of its own accord, and turned leisurely toward a rambling, barn-like structure, above the door of which appeared the sign: SIERRA SALOON.

"Knows ther smell o' red likker!" remarked a lounge, gazing curiously at the strange outfit.

"Whoa, Jakie! Hold up yer head naow an' act yer purtiest."

This was greeted with a loud guffaw, and a dandified sport, with Jewish cast of countenance, shifted uneasily in his seat.

The burro, surveying the group with heavy eyes, broke into a fiendish "bee-haw, hee-haw," that caused the Jew to color to the roots of his raven hair.

"Shet up, Jakie! Don't insult the gentlemen in the're way. Shouldn't wonder ef yeou're sp'ilin' a trade, this blessed minute. I call him Jakie in honor o' my gran'ther, and because he's so everlastin' solemn in his ways. Don't see any fun in life, Jakie don't. Bizness before folly, er somethin' o' thet kind, is his motto."

"I'm on the trade, gentlemen, an' I'll sell Jakie, ef I can't sell anything else. He's gentle ez a kitten, an' yeou kin trust your children onto his back with a feelin' of perfect security."

"Ve're all sinkle men!" remarked the Israelite, his equanimity slowly returning.

"Well, then, yeou kin trust your neighbor's children. But, ef yeou don't want Jakie, meb-be I kin sell yeou some pans."

"Pr'aps, though, I'd better interdooce myself first," taking off his hat and making an awkward effort at a bow. "I'm Josh Peppermint, the Pilgrim frum Pan-aout, originelly frum Varmount. This tin pan—"

A revolver cracked and a bullet whistled through the wire ring, causing the Pilgrim from Pan-out to drop the pan as if it had suddenly become red-hot.

At the same time, the little burro leaped excitedly into the air, nearly dismounting its rider.

"Whoa, there! Somebody take holt of his tail an' hold him down, won't ye?"

Evidently no one cared to go near those twinkling hind legs, and the burro continued to pitch backward and forward and lash out sideways in an alarming manner.

A tin pan flew into the air, and again the revolver cracked, the bullet this time cutting a ragged hole through the side of the pan.

The spirit of mischief thus evoked, grew contagious, and every time a pan or cup was tossed into the air from the back of the vicious little brute, it was greeted with a shot and its usefulness forever ended.

It was a chance for evening things, which Jakie Solomon, the Jew sport, could not resist. Of course Peppermint could have had no intention of "chaffing" him when he rode up to the saloon; but his calling the burro Jakie, had seemed very much like it, and had been so readily taken up by the loafers standing about, that it caused Solomon to flush visibly, as we have seen. And a flush, either of anger or shame, was something rarely seen on the face of Jakie Solomon, who was accounted about the slickest rascal that had ever disgraced Sierra City with his presence.

He was a confidence-man and a gambler, and greater offenses than either of these had been laid at his door.

While the burro was pitching, the tin pans flying, and the bullets whistling through the air, Solomon drew a revolver and deftly sent a shot through the peak of Peppermint's hat.

"Hold on, there! Hold on, there!" howled

the Pilgrim from Pan-out, clapping his hands to his head, thereby losing his balance and tumbling headlong to the ground.

Thus released, the burro darted wildly away, scattering pans and tin cups right and left along the narrow street.

"Hold on, I say! He who steals my— I mean tew say thet I kin lick the feller that shot thet hole through my hat. I'm a fighter frum Way Back, I am, an' I don't allaoow any man tew step on my coat-tails. Whoop!"

A wicked devil crept into Solomon's eyes and, when Peppermint momentarily halted in his eccentric gyrations, he pulled trigger again, clipping a button from the Pilgrim's coat as neatly as if done with a knife.

"There goes a button wu'th five cents! Jeerusalem, did anybody ever see sich recklessness? Say, mis er, give a fellow a show, won't you? Wait till I load my gun."

Peppermint went down into a pocket of his capacious coat and hauled out an old pepper-box pistol. Then he dived into another pocket and drew forth a small powder-horn, some balls and percussion caps, and, kneeling in the rocky street, began loading the old pepper-box as if his life depended on the celerity of his movements.

"Say, my goot frient," interposed Solomon, tempted into smiling by the very ludicrousness of the situation, "you neetn't dake so mooch droobles as all dat. If you vands do vight, I vill lent you a bistol; unt I bromise you I vill knock your eye owet so kvick as you neffer pefore heert aout."

Peppermint paid no heed to this, but continued to stuff powder and ball into the old pepper-box.

Quite a crowd had gathered, by this time. The sounds of firing and the prospect of a "picnic" would always draw a crowd in Sierra City.

The burro had disappeared down the ravine, but its line of flight could be plainly traced by the battered pans and tin cups.

Peppermint slowly arose to his feet, after pressing the percussion caps upon the nipples of his clumsy weapon.

"So yeou're the Jew-lark that insults honest people by shootin' holes through their Sunday hats, be yeou?" he cried, advancing a step and eying Solomon, fiercely. "Yeou're the sweet singer of Israel that shoots buttons off the clo'es o' wayfarin' pilgrims, hey? What did yeou do it fer?"

An angry light leaped into Solomon's dusky eyes—a light that boded danger to Peppermint, and the circle about them instinctively widened.

"Petter you go away, my goot frient. I haf pefore to-tay kilt petter men as you vor not so many vorts as you haf alreaty sboke."

The evil light in the young Jew's eyes intensified, as he uttered this warning. His lips parted in a cold, sardonic smile and his soft right hand toyed nervously with the jeweled butt of his revolver.

"Ven I shooods your had, dot makes nottings owet; t'e brice of a din ban vill puy you a petter. Ven I shooods you, my goot frient—"

"Whoop! hold me, somebody!" yelled the Pilgrim from Pan-out, turning a forward summerset and landing just in front of Solomon, with feet set widely apart.

The soft hand of the Jew shot out like lightning, there was a flash, a report—and the revolver went spinning into the middle of the street.

Peppermint had scarcely touched the ground before he leaped again, knocking the revolver from Solomon's hand, just as it exploded, and sending the bullet skyward; and the next instant the hot-hearted sport was looking squarely into the rusty tubes of the pepper-box.

He turned livid and fairly choked with rage, as he saw how cleverly he had been caught. Then his hand crept slyly toward the remaining revolver at his waist.

"No yeou don't!" yelled the self-styled pilgrim. "No monkey-business allaoowed in this ere circus. Ef you try any scaly tricks, by the great Jewpiter, I'll have to plug yeou! I'd hate tew do it, Moses, but yeou see how it is yer-self."

"My name vos nod Moses!" objected the Jew, in an agony of humiliation.

"What is it, then?"

"Jakie Solomon!" cried a bystander.

"Jakie? Somebody go an' bring me thet mule, so't I kin beg his pardin fer namin' him Jakie!"

Solomon writhed visibly under this cut, and again his hand sought the butt of the revolver.

"Don't yeou do it! I'm kinder narvous an' my fingers air a-shakin' purty loosely over this trigger naow. Ef yeou give me a start, it's cer-

tain to go off, an' I won't answer fer the damiges."

The rough miners stood aghast. Jakie Solomon was reputed the most dangerous man of all the dangerous men in Sierra City. Human life, by him, was held as lightly as the turning of a card. No one had ever thus dared defy him. An unnatural hush settled over the anxious and excited throng. Was it possible that the lion of Sierra City would crouch before this unknown vagabond?

Solomon read their thoughts and knew that his hard-won prestige was slipping away from him. He was no coward, but that circle of rusty tubes chained him to his chair.

"Vot is id you vant ofe me?" he at length managed to articulate, his voice trembling with baffled rage.

"Naow yeou're comin' to yer seven senses! Yeou shot a hole through this hat of mine. 'Tain't no beauty of a hat, that's a fac', but it's all I've got. What I'll ax yeou to do, naow, is tew git down on yer marrer-bones an' beg my pardin. Won't do it? Then I'll have tew drill a hole plum through yeou; I will, by ginger!"

Solomon squirmed uneasily. Death seemed almost preferable to such degradation. Then the blood surged hotly into his face, which had been so sallow and drawn. He determined to obey; and then, as he arose to his feet, to shoot this Pilgrim from Pan-out. In this way he might hope to discount the humiliation, and revenge himself for an insult, which, to his mind, only blood could wash out.

"I vill do id!" he snarled. "Undher brodest, mint you—unt den I varn you to look owet for yourselluf."

"Don't keer haow yeou do it, so't's done," replied Peppermint, philosophically. "I reckon I'm the most 'commodat' critter yeou ever struck. An' ez gentle ez a pussy cat, ef yeou rub me the right way. Marm used tew tell me, back in Varmount, thet I wus tew kind-hearted tew ever git along well."

A perceptible titter ran through the crowd. Solomon's quick ear caught it, and his face flushed scarlet. Then he dropped clumsily to his knees, rising instantly with a cocked revolver in his hand.

The Yankee still held the old pepper-box, and blood would have been spilled, without a doubt, had not a gaudily-dressed man pushed his way through the throng and plucked the half-lifted revolver from the hand of the Jew.

CHAPTER II.

CAPTAIN CACTUS TAKES A HAND.

THE man who had so unceremoniously disarmed Jakie Solomon was of rather imposing appearance. He was tall and comely, with lion-like head and massive brow. His eyes were brown, his features clearly cut and regular, and he wore an iron-gray mustache and imperial.

The most noticeable point about him, however, was his dress. It was a cross between the costumes of the miner and the Mexican, and consisted of doeskin pants, stuck into high top-boots, elaborately-frilled white shirt, gorgeous Mexican jacket and wide-brimmed sombrero.

A broad, scarlet scarf encircled his waist and held his weapons in place, and what at first sight looked like a huge leaf of the dog-ear cactus curled like a plume around his sombrero.

It had a slightly greenish tinge, but a glance showed that it was probably silver. The spines were certainly silver needles, and the yellow blossom was gold.

He had been in the town a number of weeks, and had gained for himself the titles of Captain Cactus and the Chaparral Cock. Except for the eccentricity of his attire, which was evidently intended to impress the beholder, he seemed a man of rather quiet tastes. There was nothing of the blustering bully about him; but a glance into the clear, brown eyes showed that the heart was as truly lion-like as the head.

The Jew turned on him with the snarl of an enraged panther. This was an interference from an unlooked-for direction. Captain Cactus had already, on one or two occasions, demonstrated his entire ability to take care of himself, but so far he had shown no disposition to interfere in the quarrels of other people.

"You wouldn't shoot a man down in cold blood, would you?" he asked, tossing the revolver into the street.

"Gif me a bistol, somepoty!" cried Solomon, angered beyond endurance and for the moment losing his head. "Gif me a bistol, kvick!"

"If you are anxious to commit suicide in that sort of style, I will lend you one of mine for the purpose. But, don't make a holy show of yourself. I only interfered to prevent bloodshed."

However, if you must have bloodshed, I'm the man to accommodate you."

Cactus spoke slowly, every word falling like the blow of a sledge-hammer.

The words recalled the Jew to his senses. That mocking devil once more crept into his eyes; the old, sardonic smile parted his red lips.

"Fery vell, my tear frient! I dings I gan agcommodate you. Gif me my bistol unt I vill meed you in te streed at twendy baces."

At this announcement the crowd fell back and Reddy Redfern, the proprietor of the Sierra Saloon, stepped forward to volunteer his services as master of ceremonies.

He had just come up from the Calamity Mine and had not witnessed the trouble between Solomon and Josh Peppermint.

Now, as his eyes fell upon the tall, gaunt figure of the Pilgrim from Pan-out, the color fled from his ruddy face and his hands trembled perceptibly.

"If Sydney Sheldon wusn't dead an' in his grave, twenty years ago, I'd swear that wus him!" he muttered, looking fixedly at the stranger. "But, pshaw! it can't be, fer I seen Shelden planted, with my own two eyes."

Peppermint still clutched his rusty weapon and was staring open-mouthed, first at Solomon and then at Captain Cactus, as if not able to comprehend this new turn of affairs.

"Well, ef this don't jest beat all the tom-cat fights in creation, then my name ain't Josh Peppermint. Wonder who that peacock feller is, anyhow? I'll ax him when he gits through with Moses."

The words broke the spell that bound Redfern. His face regained its wonted color and he turned toward Cactus.

"Allow me, capt'in! Master o' ceremonies uv a picnic like this is my best holt. A little shootin' will wake up the boys, mebbe. They're a-gittin' 'most dead in the shell fer want o' somethin' excitin'."

"Step out into the street both o' you. Hyer's yer pistol, Jakie. Stan' back to back, then walk ten steps, face each other an' when I give the word open the ball and keep it goin' till you're satisfied."

The crowd of sports, miners and toughs at once sought shelter in the doorways of the adjacent buildings. In a duel of this kind it was nothing uncommon for lead to fly wild and seek out unsuspecting targets; and none of them cared to stop bullets in that sort of style.

Captain Cactus walked boldly into the middle of the street; but his eyes never for a moment left the face of the Jew. Evidently he expected treachery and was prepared for it.

As he took his stand the cactus on his sombrero opened like an oyster and the golden image of a chaparral cock lifted itself slowly into view.

Solomon also stepped into position, the devilish light in his dusky eyes growing fairly fiendish.

Josh Peppermint had not moved from his tracks; but still nervously fingered the old pepper-box and stared stupidly at these warlike preparations.

"As soon as I gid drough mit dis shentlemens, I vill vix you, my good frient, I bromise you!" said Solomon, glancing threateningly at the Pilgrim from Pan-out.

"Sho! yeou don't r'aly meant it Moses, dew yeou?" exclaimed Peppermint, in an exasperating tone. "Pears tew me like I've heerd bantams crow afore!"

"Air you all ready?" asked Redfern, waving his handkerchief.

"Ready!" replied Cactus.

"Then march ten steps, wheel, an' wait till I give the word. Go!"

Cactus stepped out firmly; but he had not gone five paces when Solomon wheeled about, as if on a pivot, pitched his revolver into the air and fired.

It was a dastardly attempt at murder, but it was not successful.

As the revolver exploded, a ball from the old pepper-box struck the cylinder, knocking the weapon into the air and tearing its way through the shapely right hand of the Jew.

With a howl of rage and pain, Solomon attempted, with his left hand, to draw the deringer he always carried concealed in his breast.

"By ginger, ef yeou do it, I'll put the next bullet plum through yeou!" Peppermint cried, warningly. "Yeou wouldn't play fair an' yeou got yer dirty hand sp'ilt. I don't want to have to ruin yer purty face, tew, but I'll do it, Moses, ef yeou try any more of yer tricks."

Solomon was fairly caught and could do nothing but fume and rage. He had realized

that his attempted assassination of Cactus would turn the better element of Sierra City against him, but he had thought the game worth the risk. Now, that he had failed, he was fairly frenzied with venom.

Redfern was evidently aggrieved at the outcome of affairs.

"Might's well haul out o' the game, Jakie," he said, with a sickly attempt at a smile.

"They've got the dead wood on you. If you hadn't been in too big a hurry!"

"Put a rope around his neck!" shouted some one from the crowd, probably a man Solomon had ridden rough-shod over in days gone by.

"Fair play's a jewel. A rope's none too good fer a man as'll try to shoot anuther'n in the back!"

The cry evoked an ominous growl, and Redfern, seeing that trouble was brewing for the Jew, seized him and forced him bodily into the building and hurried him on through a dark hall.

"Stay in this room. They'll not be apt to find you in hyer; an' I'll send Polly down to fix up your hand."

He closed the door quietly after him, and hurried into the saloon, to find Cactus, mounted on a box in the street, talking to the excited crowd in the interest of peace and order.

The quiet, sensible address had its effect, and the angry mob gradually dispersed.

"Ain't many would do that, when a word the other way would send that pack o' fools howlin' in hyer. They're mad enough to tear the house down over Jakie's head, if they only had a leader."

The captain's generosity evidently inspired in Redfern a feeling akin to respect, for he set out a bottle of liquor and invited him to help himself.

"I owe you something handsome for what you did just now," said Cactus to the Pilgrim from Pan-out, who was still nervously fingering his weapon, as if in momentary expectation of an attack. "If we have a quiet talk perhaps I can find some way to repay you. Won't you join us in a friendly glass?"

"Don't keer ef I dew," replied Peppermint, thrusting the clumsy weapon into the folds of his coat, and turning eagerly toward the bar. "I'll wet up my whistle an' then go an' look fer thet hoss o' mine. Shouldn't be s'prised ef he's scattered them tin pans all over creation, the pesky critter!"

CHAPTER III.

PRETTY POLLY PIGEON.

THE chaparral cock again reposed quietly within the cactus, and Reddy Redfern looked inquiringly at the singular ornament, as the captain and Peppermint walked up to the bar.

"Just a fancy of mine," explained Cactus, interpreting the look. "I believe it was King Henry, of Navarre, who always went into battle with a white plume waving from his helmet. He did it that his followers might have a rallying point. By touching a hidden spring, when going into a fight, I perch my chaparral cock aloft; but for a different reason. It excites the curiosity of an antagonist and distracts his aim."

An ingenious explanation, and Redfern, as he pushed the glasses forward, said it was no doubt a good thing.

Peppermint drained his glass and started for the door.

"Thet critter 'll git clean back to Pan-out ef I don't ketch him purty soon."

"Don't be in a hurry," urged Cactus; "he's probably browsing in the valley just below. I want to have a talk with you. You did me a big favor just now, and I'm anxious to repay it."

"Call it squar', then; fer I reckon ef yeou hadn't twisted thet pistol out o' Moses's hand I'd 'a' had my toes turned up to the daisies afore this."

"You are a peddler of tinware, I believe," continued Cactus. "No doubt your stock is ruined. Now, how would you like to go into something else? Something that will pay big in this town?"

"I'm yer mutton, ef they's money in it!" replied Peppermint, a broad smile lighting his face.

"I own the building just below this—purchased it last week of Mr. Redfern. My room and office is on the second floor. The lower floor is empty. It would be a fine place for a pawn-shop. What do you say to becoming our 'uncle' of the three balls?"

"Me turn Jew?"

The Pilgrim from Pan-out sniffed the air contemptuously.

"Why not? You wouldn't really be a Jew, you know, any more than you are now. It's a good opening and there's money in it. I want to help you and will furnish you the money with which to start. It won't take much. A few pistols, an old fiddle, an accordeon or two, with counters and show-case will be all that's necessary. You can commence to-morrow. What do you say?"

"Don't go quite so fast, Mister Cactus!" Peppermint protested; "you take my breath clear away! It's kinder sudden, yeou know, an' I'll have tew think abaout it. I'll go ketch my cle burr', an' find aout the damiges an' let you know in the mornin'."

The Yankee pulled his rusty hat closer to his head and strode through the door and down the street.

"Do you think he will accept?" queried Cactus, with a smile.

"Durned fool, if he don't!" replied Redfern, mopping the bar with a dirty cloth.

Cactus drummed leisurely with his fingers for a short time and then asked:

"Have you come to any conclusion about that little trade we were talking of?"

"'Bout the Calamity Mine? Well, I've thought the thing over, some. I don't waat t' sell very bad, as I told you, when we had our last talk an' couldn't agree on some p'int; but a hundred thousand 'll take her."

"Nothing less?"

"Not a cent less."

"You own the entire interest, I believe you told me?"

"Yes, sir; the Calamity belongs to Reddy Redfern an' no one elsel."

As Redfern made the declaration he brought his hand down on the bar with a slap that made the glasses jingle.

"I bought it o' the 'riginal owner, Mortimer Tracy, an' paid him seventy-five thousan' fer it."

"I suppose you have the papers showing these facts? Tracy's release, deed or something of that kind?"

Redfern stopped in his mopping of the bar and gazed fixedly at Cactus—so fixedly that his gaze seemed to burn.

"It seems to me you're thunderin' partic'lar!" he snapped, a shade of suspicion on his face. "Don't reckon I'd sell another man's property, do you?"

"Of course I had no such thought, Mr. Redfern!" Cactus explained, blandly. "A hundred thousand dollars is a big pile of money, and a rather extensive business experience has taught me that one can never be too careful in matters of this kind. If you object to showing such papers as I mention, why, that ends the matter, and nothing more need be said about it. But if you mean to sell and can show papers authorizing a perfectly legal transfer, and will bring them to my office to-morrow, I will be ready for you. No doubt the mine is worth what you ask for it, but I must know what I am paying out my money for. Surely, you can have no objection to that."

"Of course I have the papers, an' 'll bring 'em to your office to-morrow, as you say. I thought mebbe you s'picioned I had no right to sell the mine."

As Redfern said this, he watched Cactus narrowly. If he expected to learn anything he was disappointed, for Cactus's face remained as changeless as marble.

Even the words "a hundred thousand," which Redfern rolled over his tongue as if they were sweet morsels seemed not to have affected Cactus in the least.

"No doubt he's powerful rich an' thinks no more of a hundred thousand dollars than I do of that many cents!" thought Redfern as he returned to his mopping of the bar.

A suppressed groan came from the little room into which Solomon had been hurried; and pretty Polly Pigeon came out, with a white, scared face.

"Solomon's bleeding rather badly!" she announced. "Maybe you'd better send for the doctor."

"Curse the doctor!" snarled Redfern. "I kin stop a little blood. You stay hyer till I come back."

He hastened away and Polly took her position behind the bar, casting demure glances at the stately gentleman standing at its further end.

She was Redfern's maid-of-all-work, and assisted at the bar whenever there was an extra run of custom.

Cactus had seen her frequently and noticed that she was uncommonly handsome and had a bright, intelligent look. She had also been brought to his notice in another manner, which

will appear later, and he now wondered how it came about that she occupied her present position.

He at length ventured to put the query into words:

"You are not Redfern's daughter?" with a polite bow and a lifting of the strangely adorned hat.

The bar-maid was not averse to talking and now that the way was clear, answered promptly:

"No, sir; my name is Polly Pigeon. I'm not related to Redfern, but I've lived in his family ever since I can remember. He has a daughter, though, of about my own age. Her name is Lucy, and I act as her companion when I haven't anything else to do—which isn't very often."

The last with a toss of her saucy head.

"I've noticed you in here a number of times, and believe I've heard Redfern speak of you."

"Never heard much good of me, then, I'll warrant," snapped Miss Polly. "Redfern treats me well enough, but he's not the kind of man to praise any one."

"Your name's Captain Cactus. I know it from that cactus on your hat. Funny kind of a feather, isn't it? You gave Solomon an ugly wound."

"I didn't fire that shot!" explained Cactus. "It was the Yankee peddler."

Just then Redfern came through the hall door, and the conversation was brought to an abrupt close.

"Had a small art'ry cut," said Redfern, referring to the young Jew. "Nothin' serious, though. He'll come around in a few days."

There was a clatter of pans outside, and the stentorian voice of Josh Peppermint rung through the room.

"Whoa, there! Run away ag'in, will yeou? I'll tie yeou tew this rack an' see ef yeou carry it off. Nex' time I'll put a log-chain araound yer neck; I will, I swan to man!"

The Pilgrim from Pan-out had collected a portion of his tinware, but much of it was in such a battered condition as to be worthless.

"There's the lay-out!" he exclaimed, almost fiercely, as he turned about in the door and surveyed the wreck of his stock of trade. "Not wuth five dollars! Durn a country where the men air so pesky free with the'r pistols!"

Redfern was narrowly watching the girl, who stood just behind the bar, staring stupidly at the form and face of Peppermint.

An instant later she left the room, and Redfern, deserting his bar, followed her, doubtless for the purpose of questioning her in regard to her singular actions.

"Dew yeou see thet pictur'?" demanded Peppermint, extracting a locket from the bosom of his shirt, opening it and thrusting a daguerreotype beneath the eyes of Captain Cactus. "Thet's my mother's pictur' an' I've carried it fer twenty years. Looks jist like thet girl, don't it? My mother's dead; an' ef I'd ever had a sister, I'd be baound tew say thet girl wus her."

CHAPTER IV.

ABOUT SOME PAPERS.

"Dot Gapt'in Gactus vos a pat von, unt ton'd you vorgit id!"

Jackie Solomon made the declaration, and he looked earnestly across the table into the flushed face of Redfern.

It was the night following the day on which occurred the meeting between Cactus and the Jew, and they were seated in Solomon's little room in the rear of the Sierra Saloon.

Solomon's face was pale and drawn as if from suffering, and he carried his bandaged right hand in a sling.

"It was a mighty unlucky racket fer you, anyway," said Redfern, anxiously. "I'm sorry you got mixed up in the thing. It's a-goin' to hurt your influence among the boys and if Cactus sees that I was standin' in with you it may throw our trade higher'n a kite."

"I tried to set up the cards so's you could down him, after I seen you was in fer it; but all the time I kep' a-worryin' over that sale of the Calamity. You know I felt purty certain I had him hooked fer that and if he'd 'a' went under, I'd 'a' had to hunt up another customer."

"I don't know, though, that I'm any better off and I kinder wish yit that you'd 'a' plugged him. You'd 'a' done it, too, if this Pilgrim frum Pan-out, as he calls hisself, hadn't chipped in. I feel purty sure I could 'a' fixed the thing up with the boys so's to have got you off."

"Vy didn't you plock t'e game of dis Shosh Bebbermint?" demanded Solomon, with a snarl.

His anger arose at the remembrance of how he had been balked.

"Block his game? Holy smoke! I never once thought of him doin' sech a thing. I wouldn't have believed he could 'a' hit the side of a house with that old pepper-box he carries. Who do you suppose he is, anyway?"

"I haf no itee; put he gan shood, you pet!"

"Do you know, now, he give me a terrible start when I first seen him?"

"How vos dot?" asked the Jew, opening his eyes in wonder.

"I reckon I never told you anything about Sydney Sheldon! It's a long story an' the particulars don't matter, now; but I saw Sheldon planted—and he was dead when it was done, too. This Josh Peppermint looks for all the world like Sheldon did when I seen him last. But that was twenty years ago an' of course he'd change a considerable in twenty years. And then, Sheldon wasn't a Yankee."

"Shoost a resemblance, I expect. Such t'ings often habben. Apowet dis Gactus, now! Vot vos id you visht do sbeak do me apowet heem?"

"Well, as you know, he's been a-figgerin' to buy out the Calamity. He s'oke about it ag'in to-day an' I put the price up to a hundred thousand."

"A nice bile of money, dot. A huntret t'ousand would vix us owet mighty vine!"

"Yes; so I thought. But he keeps actin' so thunderin' queer that I'm afeard there's a ketch in it; though fer the life of me I can't jest see where."

"How gueer?" questioned the Jew.

"Well, he's so infernal p'tick'lar about the papers! Asked me if they was all straight and if I had a deed frum the 'riginal owner an' wants me to bring 'em with me to his room to-morrer."

"Do you t'ink he zuspects somet'ing?" Solomon questioned.

"Blamed if I know what to think! Looks mighty like it, don't it?"

"Vot reeson dit he gif vor peing so burdic'lar?"

"Well, he said as how bizness was bizness and a hundred thousand was a mighty pile o' money and that he'd learnt frum experience to watch his hand ruther close when such a big pot was on the table."

"I ton'd know as I gan plame heem vor dot!" observed the Jew, who had the instincts of his race for keenness in business transactions. "You ton'd vos puy a horse if t'e owner vill nod allow you do loog in his moud. A huntret t'ousand tollars is some money, unt a peeze man always wants value reseeded."

"Then you would show him the papers?"

"If you zell do heem you vill haf do, I egspect. Dey vill sdant a burdy glose egsaminashun. You gan egsipit dem, but you needn't durn dem ofer undil you ged t'e gash."

"I wish you could go along and keep an eye on him. If he tries any scaly tricks I may need help."

"No, t'ank you! You musd egsceuse me, if you blease. I haf zeen heem so much as I vant do undil dis hant gids petter. You gan keeb your vetter eye oben, unt if he dries do gid t'e babers mitout baying t'e money virst—vell, you vill know vot to do mitout any adwise vrom me."

"Plug him, you mean?" and Redfern ground his teeth savagely.

"My tear frient, I neffer like do adwise in gvestions like dose!" replied Solomon, his eyes twinkling wickedly.

For a long time they sat thus, conversing and planning, but finally separated; Redfern returning to the bar-room and Solomon walking out into the street.

Along in the afternoon of the day following Redfern left the bar in care of Polly Pigeon, and wended his way toward the office of Cactus, in the adjoining building. He carried the precious papers in an inside pocket of his closely-buttoned coat.

Peppermint had already opened his pawnshop, and the Lombardy arms, represented by three gilt balls, swung gayly in the breeze.

As Redfern passed through this room he greeted the Yankee in his politest manner.

"Couldn't sell you anything, I reckon?" questioned Peppermint, eager for a trade. "This 'ere tin pan ain't very much damaged, an' I'll sell it dog-cheap."

"Don't want nothin' to-day, I believe!" replied Redfern, surveying the array of battered tinware.

"Seems kinder funny, don't it? Josh Peppermint, the Pilgrim frum Pan-a-out, playin' Uncle Three-Balls! Ef anybody'd 'a' tole me thet a week ago it'd 'a' made me p'izen mad."

"A man must be ready to turn his hand to anything in this country!" Redfern observed, carelessly. "Is Capt'n Cactus in his room?"

"I r'aly don't know," replied Peppermint, "but I b'leeve he is. Yes, come to think of it, I see'd him go up there 'baout an haour ago, an' he had a young man with him."

Redfern frowned. This was not at all to his liking; but he had gone too far to think of retreating, and proceeded to climb the rickety stairway leading to the second floor.

"Come in!" called Cactus, in Western fashion, as Redfern tapped at the door of his office.

"Allow me to present a friend of mine, Mr. Frederick Grimshaw! He is the new notary, located in the block below. I thought if we made a trade it would be well to have some one present to draw our papers and arrange matters in proper shape."

Grimshaw, the notary, was a pleasant-faced young man, with the air and bearing of a gentleman. Redfern had seen him before and now greeted him rather coldly; but the young notary seemed not to notice it and retired to his seat near the window and again directed his attention to the movements in the street.

"Have a glass of wine!" said Cactus, pushing a filled wine-glass across the table to his visitor. "I seldom drink anything myself. It don't agree with me."

Redfern was endeavoring to keep his weather-eye open, as the Jew had advised, and it occurred to him that possibly the wine was drugged.

"No!" he replied, shoving the glass away. "Takes somethin' that's got the fire in it, to tech the right spot in me. Wine's too much like water; an' I didn't come fer drinkin', nohow."

"Business before pleasure, eh?" laughed Cactus. "That suits me just as well. I believe you placed your figures at one hundred thousand for the mine?"

"One hundred thousand, cash in hand. No checks, mind you; but the money."

"Very well. Cash it shall be. I suppose you brought the papers I spoke of?"

Redfern cautiously unbuttoned his coat and drew out a package wrapped in a soiled newspaper.

"There they air. Put down your hundred thousand and you can have 'em an' my deed into the barg'in."

"You'll let me look at them first, I suppose?" Cactus queried.

"You can look at 'em all you want to," growled Redfern, "but mind you, they don't go out of my han's until I see the money on the table."

Cactus laughed again, as if he considered Redfern's extraordinary caution in the light of a joke.

"Just as you please. It don't make any difference. Only, I must see them, of course, before I part with my money."

Redfern removed the soiled wrapper and displayed the papers on the table. They were two deeds; one purporting to convey the Calamity Mine from the first claimant to Mortimer Tracy and the other conveying it from Tracy to Redfern.

Cactus scanned them narrowly.

"There is a singular resemblance in the signatures to those two deeds," he observed, "although, on their face, they show that they were made by different men at widely separated times. If I was called on, now, to testify as an expert in regard to the matter I should have to say they were both written by the same man!"

As he said this, he looked Redfern squarely in the eyes.

"What do you mean?" demanded the latter, sweeping the papers from the table and rising to his feet.

"Just what I said!" replied Cactus. "I don't say the signatures are forgeries, but I do say they are strangely alike. I suppose you will not object to my taking copies so that I may investigate the matter before going further?"

"It's a devilish plot!" shrieked Redfern, terror-stricken, backing toward the door.

"You can't get out that way," said Cactus, covering the trembling wretch with his revolver. "I locked the door after you, and now have the key in my pocket."

"What do you want?" demanded Redfern, hoarsely, looking wildly toward the open window, at which Grimshaw was sitting.

"Copies of those papers. You can retain the originals. I am certain they are worthless, but I have no right to them."

"Grimshaw, take those papers. Copy them, word for word, and certify to the copies over your seal and signature. Then return them to this gentleman."

"Just as well take it cool, Redfern. I've got you and mean to keep you here until I please to let you go. I know those papers are not straight and the less fuss you make, the better it will be for you."

Redfern reeled helplessly into a chair, his red face growing ashy pale; and when Grimshaw took the papers from his nerveless fingers, he uttered not a word of protest.

"Now, that's sensible. There ought to be no trouble over a little business transaction, between gentlemen like ourselves. Your papers will not be injured in the least."

"Who in the devil air you, anyhow?" gasped Redfern, a hunted look in his eyes.

"Me? Why, I'm called Captain Cactus, generally. Sometimes, when gentlemen wish to be particularly complimentary, they call me the Chaparral Cock. One's as good as another. A name don't amount to anything; we always look at the man behind the name. Shakespeare, I believe, has something to say on that subject; but I never was good at quoting poetry."

Cactus smiled sweetly, but he never removed his hand from the revolver that lay on the table with deadly stare staring straight into the face of the man who cowered before him.

"Scratch, scratch," went the pen of the notary, as it glided swiftly across the pages of legal cap. "Scratch, scratch, scratch," and in a few minutes the work was done.

"Now, give him his papers, Grimshaw!" said Cactus, when the copies were completed.

Then to Redfern, as he turned toward the now unlocked door:

"As soon as I can investigate the matter I will take great pleasure in calling on you."

"Not if I know myself, you won't!" growled Redfern, wheeling in the doorway and pitching his revolver forward.

CHAPTER V.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

BENEATH the cottonwoods, down by the little mountain stream dignified by the name of river, under the pale light of the stars, a young man and young woman were slowly walking. That they were lovers and the meeting a secret one might be seen at a glance.

"I had a terrible time in getting away this evening," said the young woman, her hand trembling slightly, as it rested on the arm of her companion. "Redfern is growing suspicious. He watches me like a hawk; and, oh, do you know, Fred! I am afraid we will have to give up these meetings altogether. He wanted me to 'tend bar this evening; and when I feigned a headache, he asked if I had seen you lately and turned on me so suddenly that I know I started."

The speaker was pretty Polly Pigeon, and the young man she addressed as Fred was none other than Grimshaw, the notary.

"Has he said anything to indicate why he is becoming suspicious?" the latter asked, anxiously.

"No; but he saw us walking together the other evening. You know he wants me to marry Jackie Solomon. When I came home that evening he told me I must not speak to you again; that you were a nobody and Solomon a man of wealth, and he could not allow me to throw myself away."

"Then, this afternoon, when he came down from the office of Captain Cactus, looking whiter and more like a corpse than I ever saw him look before, he went at once to Solomon's room and I heard him mention your name and make terrible threats against you."

"Was Captain Cactus hurt? I heard a shot, and it was rumored that he had had an altercation with Redfern."

"I am glad to say he wasn't injured in the least. Redfern fired at him from the doorway. The ball passed through the window and came nearer hitting me than it did Cactus."

"Oh, dear, how dreadful!" exclaimed Polly, sympathetically. "What was it all about? Was it brought on by that trouble the captain had with Jackie Solomon?"

The young man smiled at her eagerness and the rapidity with which she plied her questions. "I am afraid that my little Polly has all the curiosity usually attributed to women."

He ran his fingers through her soft, brown hair, as he said this, and kissed the radiant cheek she willingly yielded.

"In the first place: I think Redfern looks upon Cactus with suspicion. His actions lead me to believe that he expected and hoped that Solomon would kill the captain in that street fight."

"Cactus has talked of buying the Calamity Mine. Redfern is extremely anxious to sell it,

if he can get a good, round sum; but the captain's expressed suspicions as to the title filled him with apprehension.

"Once before they were on the point of agreeing, when Redfern broke off because of something the captain said."

"Finally, when Cactus agreed to give one hundred thousand dollars for the property, Redfern consented to bring the deeds to his office for examination. They were brought, and Cactus, after looking them over, expressed a conviction that there was something wrong and asked that he might be allowed to make copies."

"To this Redfern objected, but was forced to consent, at the muzzle of a revolver."

"I made the copies; and when Redfern was given the originals and allowed to go, he fired the shot which you heard."

"My dear, am I plain and explicit enough to satisfy you?"

"Plain enough, certainly, Fred; but I can't see why Redfern and Captain Cactus should suspicion each other so!"

"There is a cause for it all, you may depend on it!"

"Now, tell me something about yourself, Polly. I am tired of hearing of mines and titles and intrigues. Here is a pleasant seat, and we can rest while you talk. What has my little girl been doing, since we last met?"

"Oh, Fred, ever so many things! I couldn't begin to tell half. Let's see! Yesterday morning I brushed out Lucy Redfern's hair; then I put new bandages on Solomon's hand; then I went down to the bar and—"

"Polly, Polly! You know I don't mean anything of that kind. But now that you have mentioned Solomon you may tell me what he has had to say to you lately."

"He was complimentary, as usual. Told me I was the prettiest girl in the West—"

"I must give the rascal credit for good taste," interposed Grimshaw, laughingly.

"Said he wanted to marry me; and would I name the happy day?"

"Same over here, Polly! Don't forget that, will you?"

Grimshaw's arm encircled her slender waist and he essayed to draw her to him.

"I can't tell anything if you bother me that way!" protested Polly, pouting her red lips.

"Go on! I won't offend again."

"Do you want to know what I told him?"

"Certainly! Every word."

"I told him that I couldn't marry him—"

"That you loved another!"

"No; I didn't tell him anything of the kind. I simply told him that I couldn't marry him; that he was wasting his time; that there were other girls in the town, any one of whom would make him a better wife; and that he was foolish to press the subject further."

"And then what did he do?"

"He held the glory of his riches up before my eyes; said it was Redfern's wish, and graciously gave me further time to think about it."

"Why should Redfern wish you to marry him?"

"I have thought of that, Fred, again and again. All I can surmise is that they are together engaged in some crooked work and Redfern feels under obligation to aid Solomon in his suit."

"I almost know that is it. There can be no other reason; for, personally, Redfern is nothing to me. He is not even distantly related. I have lived in his family nearly all my life, but he takes no pains to treat me with any consideration. He does not ill use me and generally speaks of me as a member of his family; but he does not at all treat me as such. I am his maid-of-all-work, nothing more!"

"Oh, Fred, if you could only know what a humiliation it has been to me to stand behind that bar and listen to the coarse talk of the rabble that usually haunts it! I rebelled, at first, and nearly cried myself sick, but it did no good."

The tears came into her eyes and she nestled closer against his manly shoulder, as if for protection.

"Well, my darling, this will not be for long, believe me!" he said, lifting the drooping head and straining her to his heart. "There are some things I cannot explain now. You must simply trust me and believe me when I say they will all be made clear in the future. I know it is bitter, this life you lead, but you can bear it a little longer. It is best for my plans and hopes that you should. Then we will go far from here, where the memory of your present condition can never rise to haunt you."

She raised her head, the tears showing in her eyes like dewdrops.

"I do believe you, Fred; and trust you com-

pletely. Have I not shown that trust by agreeing to commit my whole future into your keeping?"

"You have, Polly!" Grimshaw responded, solemnly, a happiness too great for words illumining his face.

"There is one other point, Fred!" Polly ventured, timidly. "You have seen the Yankee peddler—Josh Peppermint, from Pan-out, as he calls himself?"

"I have both seen him and laughed at him!" answered Grimshaw, smiling at the remembrance of Peppermint's eccentricities.

"Do you know that it almost seems to me that Peppermint must be my brother?" Polly asked, looking anxiously into her lover's face.

"Your brother!"

Grimshaw's tone expressed the astonishment he felt.

"Yes; my brother!"

"But you told me you had no brother."

"I haven't; and that's what makes it seem so queer."

Grimshaw stared at her, as if he doubted her entire sanity.

"Oh, you needn't look at me so! I mean it; every word."

"What ever put such an idea into your head?" he queried.

"It does seem a foolish notion! But, Fred, I have a little miniature of my father, which I have kept for years. I found it, one day, while rummaging among the few things he left at his death. I showed it to Redfern. He informed me that it was the picture of my father, Peter Pigeon, and asked me to let him keep it for me. Child as I was, something in his tone made me think he wanted to destroy it. I refused to give to him and he tried to take it away from me. Then I fled and concealed it away; professing, afterward, that I had lost it. He stormed about it for several weeks, but I stuck to my story and he finally quieted down. Since I have grown to womanhood he has never mentioned the matter, probably thinking I have forgotten it."

"When I first saw Peppermint, his face, although a little youthful, so resembled the one in the miniature that it seemed as if my father must be standing before me. The idea is absurd, of course; but it has haunted me ever since."

"Just a fancy, no doubt, called up by a most singular resemblance to your father!" suggested Grimshaw. "However, I'll question Peppermint about it at the first opportunity."

"We must be going now. It won't do for you to be away from the house too long. Redfern may miss you and institute a search; and if he should discover our trysting-place he would probably put a stop to our meetings."

He assisted her to her feet, as he spoke, and they walked slowly back through the grove toward the Sierra Saloon, above which the family of Reddy Redfern resided.

"Now, we must say 'good-night,'" he said, when they had reached the limits of the grove. "It will not do for us to be seen in this vicinity together."

But, although he had said "good-night" and kissed the fair, upturned face, he still lingered, holding her hand and talking the small nonsense so dear to a maiden's heart.

Then the time came when they must separate; and, with a parting kiss, he turned into the shadows of the nearest buildings and wended his way to his office, which was also his sleeping apartment.

Polly Pigeon waited till the sound of his footsteps ceased to reverberate along the rocky sidewalk. Then she, too, crept like a shadow to her room above the saloon.

When she was gone, a swarthy face peered from the undergrowth. It was the face of Jackie Solomon.

"I t'ought, Miss Bolly, you vos oop to zum drick, mit dose he'taches!" he exclaimed, a smile of intense satisfaction lighting his evil face. "So, dot vos your leedle game, eh? Ve vill dry unt bud a prake on t'e wheel of dose carriches dot run so smood!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WRONG MAN.

"HALT! Put up your hands!" Clear and sharp came the command from the side of the rocky trail.

Backed as it was by the muzzle of a gleaming rifle, the horseman felt compelled to obey, and his hands went above his head with great celerity.

Then out of the darkness swarmed a half-score of armed and masked men.

The horseman thought only of road-agents,

for those ungentlemanly toll-takers had been of late industriously working the Pan-out trail.

"You will find a few dollars in a purse in my pocket. Take it. You are welcome to all it contains. Then, I trust, you will allow me to proceed, as I am in something of a hurry."

His words were bitter with scorn.

"Not so fast, Mister Cactus!" growled the rough voice of the leader. "We don't want your money; we want you!"

As he spoke, he turned the light of a bull's-eye lantern full into the horseman's face. A low, smothered curse escaped him as he did so. The face revealed was the face of Grimshaw, the notary.

To understand how it came about that Grimshaw was found at so late an hour on the rocky trail leading from Pan-out, it will be necessary to turn back a little.

When he parted from Polly Pigeon he went direct to his own room, as stated in the preceding chapter. There he found a note, directing him to call immediately at the office of Captain Cactus.

There was a shade of annoyance on Cactus's face when the young notary made his appearance.

"I've been waiting for you an hour," he said, with an impatient wave of the hand. "I went over to your office a little while ago and left a note, which I suppose you found."

Grimshaw flushed hotly.

"I had no idea you would want me so soon," he apologized. "You said eleven o'clock, I believe!"

Cactus turned toward him the face of his watch. It indicated midnight.

"So late as that? I had no—I mean I—"

"Let's get down to business," urged Cactus, paying no heed to the attempted explanation, to Grimshaw's great relief.

"If you start now, you ought to reach Pan-out by noon to-morrow. You can make a thorough examination of the records in an hour's time. Then you can make the trip back so as to reach Sierra City to-morrow night."

"It will be a pretty tough jaunt, but I guess you can stand it. Can you go right away? I have a horse, saddled and bridled, in waiting in the side-street below."

"I know of nothing to detain me," Grimshaw replied. "Will it be necessary to take the copies?"

"No; look them over here. I don't want to risk their falling into Redfern's hands. He is likely to attribute a great deal more of importance to them than they actually possess, and may make an effort to recover them. If he knew of your errand he might have you stopped, and for that reason I think it advisable for you to leave and arrive at the place in the night."

While he talked Cactus spread out on the table the copies of the deeds he had forced from Redfern.

"You can remember their phraseology sufficiently well to make the necessary comparison should more than one be found on the records. I am only anxious to see what Redfern really has done in the matter."

The notary examined them minutely for a few moments and then announced his readiness to start.

"The horse is a good one, as you will find!" Cactus assured him, as he held the door open after him and bade him good-night.

The Sierra Saloon was in full blast when Grimshaw rode out from the little side-street in which the horse had been tied. Few pedestrians were abroad, however, and he reached the outskirts of the town, as he believed, without having attracted the notice of any one.

The trail led through a wild, half-mountainous country, and when he reached Pan-out it was high noon of the following day.

He was utterly worn out, not being accustomed to such hard riding, and sought the nearest public house for rest and refreshment.

There he managed to catch an hour's much-needed sleep. He awoke feeling fresher and more like himself and repaired at once to the little court-house, in which the county offices were located. It required but a hasty examination to show that only one of the deeds was on record, the one conveying the mine from the original claimant to Mortimer Tracy.

Then he paid his bills, mounted his horse, which had had the benefit of a good feed and excellent grooming, and started on his return trip.

Nothing occurred on the way to occasion the slightest uneasiness until he came to the rocky bend, ten miles out from Sierra City.

He had not thought of danger. He had noth-

ing with him that a road-agent would care for, excepting a revolver and the small amount of money in his purse, and he rode lightly along, thinking much more of pretty Polly Pigeon than of the results of his journey or the dangers that might lie in his way.

Then came that startling command and the swarming of masked men out of the darkness.

Grimshaw caught at the name of Cactus. The words of the leader showed that, if these were regular road-agents, on this occasion at least they were after higher game than usual.

"What do you want of me?" he demanded, hoping that now they had discovered he was not the man they sought, they would allow him to proceed.

"Come hyer, Jimmy!" exclaimed the leader, to one who was evidently his lieutenant. "I can't make head nor tail of this thing. Didn't ther boss say it'd be Captain Cactus we'd meet?"

"Dade, thin, an' that's the thruth ye're tellin'!" said the person addressed, coming out of the gloom.

The upper part of his face was masked; but the fringe of red whiskers under the chin, and above all the accent, betrayed his nationality.

"An' it's not the capt'in ye're afther havin'? Phat koid av a birrud is it, thin? An' how in the name o' St. Patrick does it come that the capt'in's turned into a felly loike this?"

He was evidently, as much amazed and non-plused as the leader and stared stupidly at Grimshaw, through the holes in his mask.

"Who were you looking for?" asked Grimshaw.

"Capt'in Cactus!" replied the leader.

"Well, you can see I am not Captain Cactus. Why, then, do you hold me here?"

"It's that jay-birrud av a lawyer!" exclaimed the Irishman. "He's in wid Cactus an' we'd better hould 'im! Did ye see annythin' av the capt'in in the thrail beyant?"

The question was addressed to Grimshaw.

"I did not! I suppose he is in Sierra City. He was there when I saw him last."

"Wusn't he in Pan-out, the day? The thruth, now, er it'll be the worse fer ye! Ain't this a thrick av the capt'in's, an' won't he be comin' along a little lather?"

There was a threat in the tones and the Irishman's hand sought his revolver, as he plied the questions.

"I tell you I haven't seen Captain Cactus since leaving Sierra City!" Grimshaw protested. "To the best of my knowledge and belief, he is there now. If you doubt it you can go and investigate. I am certain he has not been in Pan-out; and if you wait here till daylight you will not find him on this trail."

The earnestness of his manner carried conviction.

"Be gob, I b'lieve the youngster's tellin' it sthright!" the Irishman declared, turning to the leader, whose place he had taken as spokesman. "May the devil fly away wid me if I can undherstand it, at all."

Then, to Grimshaw:

"Phat tuk ye to Pan-out, annyhow?"

This was a question Grimshaw would have preferred not to answer. It was plain the road-agents had blundered. But why did they wish to take Cactus and what led them to believe they would find him there?

Doubtless the "boss" of whom they had spoken, had seen him leave Cactus's office the night before and was deceived by the darkness into believing that Cactus was the rider that had departed for Pan-out. If this surmise was correct then this "boss" must be Redfern, for none other could have any interest in the matter.

When Grimshaw had reasoned to this point he was as much in the dark as ever. Men do not trouble themselves much without motives, and the motives which would inspire Redfern to attempt the capture of Cactus, he could not arrive at; unless possibly it was the hope of obtaining possession of those copies.

"Arrah, now, can't ye sphake?" cried the Irishman, becoming impatient. "Phat war ye doo'n at Pan-out?"

"I went there to examine some records," answered Grimshaw, thinking it best to be conciliatory.

"An' who sint ye?"

Again the young notary hesitated, but finally replied:

"Captain Cactus!"

"I tould ye he wus in wid the capt'in!" exclaimed the Irishman, triumphantly. "We'll have to hould 'im until we git orthers frum the boss."

"Take 'im to ther cave, then, an' keep 'im there till I come back!" ordered the leader, who

was glad that something tangible seemed at last to present itself. "I'll go into town an' report. Better leave some o' the boys to watch the trail till mornin'. These lawyers air slippery cusses an' it won't do to trust 'em too fur."

He wheeled his horse and dashed up the trail in the darkness.

The Irishman posted the men as instructed, and dropping in behind Grimshaw, with cocked revolver, ordered him on.

The notary had been cudgeling his brain for a feasible plan of escape, but none presented itself. The Irishman seemed to divine his thoughts, for, as they stumbled forward, he said:

"No thricks, moind ye, av ye don't want a bullet in yer back! Ye'll foind that the diff'rance atwixt a wise mon an' a fool is that a wise mon knows whin to fight an' whin to run; an' a fool don't know either."

The Irishman was a garrulous fellow and kept up a running fire of comment that served to draw Grimshaw's thoughts away from the unpleasantness of his position.

But, after a time, he wearied of this incessant chatter and his mind flew back to pretty Polly Pigeon. He wondered what she would think of his long absence; and what Cactus would do when he learned what had befallen his messenger.

The way was rough and stony, and their progress slow. He tried to recall some familiar landmark and thus fix in his mind the direction they were taking; but it seemed they were traveling in devious circles.

In fact this was what they were doing; and hour after hour passed without much actual progress being made. This served the Irishman's purpose, however, which was to thoroughly puzzle and mystify the young notary; and when, a short time before day, they entered a dark canyon which concealed the entrance to a cave, they were nearer Sierra City than when they started, although it seemed, to Grimshaw's bewildered mind, that they must be miles away.

"You can make yerself as comfortable as ye plase!" said the Irishman, when they passed into the cave. "I'll not tie ye, unless ye cut up rusty an' thry some thrick on us. Remember that the dure is gy'arded. If the capt'in comes back an' says let ye go, go it is. If he says hould ye, we'll have it to do."

Grimshaw scarcely heard the words. He was thoroughly worn out in mind and body. The long ride to Pan-out and the subsequent excitement had consumed his strength, and he sunk wearily to the sandy floor and was soon locked in the sleep of exhaustion.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SHADOW UNDER THE BED.

THE shadowy figure of a man crept to the door of Jackie Solomon's apartment in the rear of the Sierra Saloon. It was night and the feeble light creeping in through the dirty window at the end of the hall was not sufficient to reveal his identity.

He had evidently removed his shoes, for in moving about he made no more noise than if he had really been the shadow he seemed.

He paused at the door, first applying an eye to the keyhole, then an ear. Evidently satisfied that the room was empty, he unlocked the door by means of a skeleton-key and entered.

There was a bed in the room, made of planks roughly put together, and beneath this he concealed himself, drawing about his form a few old clothes that Solomon, after his untidy fashion, had tossed under the bed.

As he settled comfortably into position, the moon, plunging for an instant from behind the masses of clouds which partially obscured it, sent a ray of light into his place of concealment, revealing the pair of cocked revolvers he had placed on the floor convenient to his hands.

The sounds of approaching voices caused him to shrink still closer against the wall.

The speakers were Solomon and Redfern, and they were approaching by the same route the shadow had taken.

"McClure will not be hyer fer a good while yit!" said Redfern, as Solomon unlocked the door. "Might's well have a friendly game while we're waitin' fer him."

Solomon lighted the little lamp which rested on the table and flashed its light hastily about the chamber and underneath the bed. But he made no close search, and the man concealed beneath the bundle of old clothes escaped his observation.

"Ofe gourse no von vould pe in here; I knot dot, bud id's a hapid ofe mine!" the Jew explained to Redfern, who was regarding him curiously.

"Well, I declare, Jakie, you're as nervous as an old woman! You'll have to git married, sure, so's to have some one to look after you. I'll bet a glass o' good likker that Polly don't look under her bed every night."

He thought his words exquisitely humorous and laughed loudly at their close.

The intended joke annoyed the Jew somewhat, but he said nothing, and fished a pack of greasy cards from the desk of the table.

"If nottings habbens to brewent, Gactus ought to pe in McClure's hants pefore now," he remarked, carelessly.

The shadow under the bed moved slightly, and removed the clothing from about its head.

"Of course he didn't find nothin' on the records, except the first deed. It's a good thing, maybe, that you didn't git the other one recorded. He's playin' some deep game, as certain as your name's Jakie Solomon. Just what it is, I don't know. The question now is, what'll we do with him after gittin' holt of him? If we git back the papers which I reckon he carried, that'll destroy what evidence there is ag'in' me."

"De't men dell no dales!" replied the Jew, quoting the bloodthirsty proverb that has been the justification of so many crimes. "He is working vor someboby; unt dot somepoty must neffer hear his rebort. If you tesdroy dose babers he gan brove dem py dis notairy. Gid Gactus oud ofe t'e vay unt I vill vix t'e notairy myselluf."

Redfern smiled at the declaration.

"Grimshaw's a-stickin' too close to Polly, eh?"

"Altogedder too glose, mine frient," replied the Jew, a treacherous light in his eyes. "Unt Bolly is sdickin' too glose to heem."

"Seems to me you're gittin' several interestin' contracs on your han's," observed Redfern, sagely. "You want to put Cactus out of the way; you've swore to kill this Yankee peddler fer doin' up yer hand; an' now you're a-goin' to lay out the notary."

He dealt the cards, and they were soon deeply immersed in the game. A half-hour passed. Then the clatter of a horse's hoofs sounded in the rocky street, and a few moments later a heavy step was heard in the hall.

"Id's McClure!" exclaimed Solomon, raking the cards from the table. "Now we'll hear vrom ower ferry goot frient, Gactus!"

Redfern swung open the door, as the footsteps approached it.

"A little sooner'n I looked fer you," he called out, "but you're welcome, just the same."

"I come as fast as my hoss'd carry me," the man explained, as he entered. "Things took sich a queer turn I didn't know what to do."

He was a swarthy, heavily-built fellow, with a brutal face. He wore no mask now, but the voice showed him to be the man who had so unceremoniously stopped Grimshaw a little over an hour before, on the Pan-out trail.

"How's that?" asked Redfern, his alarm revealed in his tones, while Solomon stared blankly across the table.

McClure seated himself deliberately, and tipped his chair against the wall before replying:

"Captain Cactus never went ter Pan-out!"

"Oh, but you must be mistaken, you know," objected Redfern.

"I zeen him leaf his offees my owen selluf," protested the Jew, "unt I voller heem vor den miles owet. He vent to Ban-out—I know id!"

"Jist the same thar's whar ye'r left!" said McClure, decidedly. "It war this pesky young lawyer at they call Grimshaw."

Redfern glared at Solomon, as if he wished to punish him for his blunder.

"Is dot so?" exclaimed Solomon, a curious light creeping into his dusky eyes. "You helt heem anyhow, I subbose?"

"I sent him to ther cave in charge o' Jimmy Sullivan, and rode hyer as fast as my hoss'd come."

"An' you're cert'in Cactus didn't slip by you?"

Redfern put the question in the hopeless tone of one who knows the answer will be against him.

"Nary a slip! An' to make sure thar war no trick bein' played, I left some o' the boys to guard the trail till mornin'."

As he made this statement, McClure drew a pipe from his pocket and coolly proceeded to fill and light it.

Redfern stared at the Jew, as if dumfounded; and the Jew returned the gaze with that curious light playing in his dusky eyes.

"Grimshaw didn't have no papers nor anything of the kind about him?" Redfern queried, after a minnte's silence.

"Nary a paper!" was McClure's sententious reply.

"My frients, to you know dot I am nod sure I am sorry dis has habben'd?" Solomon asked, still staring hard at Redfern.

The latter looked his surprise.

"Vy not, eh? I subbose I vos misdaken in t'e man; unt if so Gactus is sdill in down. He has dose babers. Dis notairy is sure vorkin' vor heem. Ve gan zay do Gactus: gif us dose babers unt ve vill let your frient go. If nod, unt you dry do use dem in any vay against ower frient, Retvern, your frient, t'e notairy vill pe liable do gid his neck proke!"

"Do you think he'd do it?" Redfern asked, eagerly.

"I relief he vout!"

"Then, when you let this hyer notary go, he could prove that such papers had been in existence. You fergit that p'int!"

"I vorgid nothings. Ve vill nod led dis notairy go. Ve vill virst opdain dose babers. Den I haf a leedle seddlemend do make mit dis Crimshaw. Ven I gid t'rough mit heem he gan desdify all he vants—if he is aple."

"You'd put him out of the way, eh? That might do, but you must remember that in makin' this offer we'd have to show our hand."

"My tear frient, no more as ve haf alre'tty shown id. He knows somet'ing apowet dis mine peesness or he vout nod gare vor dose babers. If ve ton'd dell heem apowet our gabture ofe t'e notairy, I varrand you he vill vind id owet in some vay. Ve lose nottings, unt ve may gain mooch."

"You'll have to make the proposition then, fer I'll be hanged if I'm a-goin' to his room ag'in!"

Redfern's face betrayed his uneasiness, as he made this declaration.

"I haf arrached dot!" the Jew proceeded, confidently. "Ve gan make dis nogozhiation t'rough your t'augter, Miss Luzy."

"She'll never do it!" Redfern protested.

"Oh, yes, I bromise you!"

"Well, how'll you githar to do it?"

"Shud her ub in her room dill she is vil-ling."

"Durned if I do!"

"All righd, my frient, if you ton'd vand dose babers id is nod mooch owet do me."

Redfern twisted uneasily in his chair, while McClure removed the pipe from his mouth, so astonished was he at the audacity of the proposal.

"Do you reckon she will do it, if I threaten her that way?" Redfern asked, anxiously.

"Blame it, I'd hate to lock up my own daughter!"

"You gan dry id. I am zadisfiet id vill vork like a charm!"

Redfern rubbed his chin and for a time stared at the ceiling, as if in deep thought.

"Hang it, Jakie! Can't you go to Cactus with that proposal?" he at last blurted out.

"I am zadisfiet no von coult agcomblish so mooch as your t'augter!" the Jew answered, serenely. "A vomans gan do more mit a man like Gactus dan all t'e men in dis gountry."

"But she may tell him that we made her go to him with the offer."

"So mooch t'e petter. He vill pe villing zooner do gombromise do gid her owet ofe her droubles. A man like Gactus cannot long zee a voman cry mitout drying do bellup her."

Redfern gazed at the crafty Jew with admiration.

"I wish I had your head piece, Jakie. It would be worth money to me. I hate to seem to turn ag'in' my own daughter, but I guess I can make it all right with her after the thing's over. She'll cry, of course, an' kick up a rumpus, but a silk dress 'll set it all right, I reckon. I've been promisn' her one and that'll be a good time to git it."

How little Redfern understood the nature of woman can be inferred from the above speech. He loved his daughter, after his own unlovely fashion. To him she was a being to be cajoled and flattered by toys and playthings. A creature whom a silk dress would make happy and from whose mind a gorgeous wardrobe would blot out all remembrance of wrong-doing.

It is possible her own wayward and vacillating conduct had created much of this belief, for, in truth, Lucy Redfern was not a woman of very stanch and enduring principles. She was vain and foolish, but her heart was right as women's hearts are apt to be; and if her head went wrong, occasionally, it is little to be wondered at, when her parentage, training and opportunities are taken into consideration.

"I'm ez dry ez a fish!" declared McClure, knocking the ashes from his pipe into the palm

of his hand and then letting them fall to the floor.

This gentle hint recalled Redfern from the reverie into which he had drifted.

"Come into the bar and have somethin'!" he said, rising; an example which was followed by Jakie Solomon.

"I reckon you'll leave town before it gits light. Hold that feller fast, till we try this little trick of Jakie's. If it won't work we'll have to think of something else."

They streamed into the hall and out into the bar-room, where a coal-oil lamp was feebly burning, as if, in its deserted state, it had a notion of falling asleep with the sleeping town.

When the clink of glasses showed that they were at their potations, the shadow began to move.

First a hand, holding a revolver; then the head and finally the entire body emerged from beneath the bed.

"Great Jewpiter! Ef this don't jest beat all creation. Grimshaw's in the han's o' the Philistines, an' Cactus is to have a visit from Redfern's darter—thet is, ef they kin git her to come. This 'ere sky-larkin's paid big. Naow, I'd better hump myself er Moses 'll find me when he comes back."

The shadow was Josh Peppermint, the Pilgrim from Pan-out.

He crept softly into the hall, deftly unlocked the door at the rear and stole out into the darkness; while the trio of villains in front clinked their glasses and joked over their plans, wholly unconscious that a spy had heard every word that had been uttered.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED REVELATION.

LUCY REDFERN was talking to her pet canary and thrusting bits of bread between the wires of its cage, when she heard her father's heavy step in the hall.

It was the morning after the consultation between Redfern and Jakie Solomon.

She hung the cage in the sunlight and, stepping to the glass, brushed the wayward hair back from her brow and then, as he knocked, turned to open the door.

Lucy Redfern was rather handsome; of the blonde type, with pale face and hair approaching auburn. Admiring friends, who wished to flatter, assured her that it was the color of Titian gold. She accepted the compliment, although she had no earthly idea what Titian gold was like; and, gratified by the praise, never became weary in her care of it.

No matter at what time of the day or night a visitor was announced, he, or she, was almost certain to find Lucy Redfern engaged in "doing up" or "taking down" her hair. And she consumed such quantities of curl-paper and invisible pins and cobweb netting that Reddy Redfern often declared that she would ruin him by her extravagance.

Her eyes were a pale, washed-out blue, and were the one feature of her face that revealed the weakness and changefulness of her nature.

"Oh, paw, is that you?" she cried. "I was just thinking of you. There is such a lovely brooch at Peppermint's pawn-shop. A miner left it yesterday. He is to redeem it in five days or it becomes Peppermint's property. He said, if it wasn't redeemed, I might have it for twenty dollars. Won't you look at it as you go by? Twenty dollars isn't much, you know!"

The speech pleased Redfern, who was glad to have a chance to promise something in return for the favor he was about to ask.

"You'll break me up!" he said, sinking into a chair with a smile. "I reckon you don't want that an' the silk dress, too?"

"Oh, I couldn't think of getting along without the dress! I want them both. You'll get them for me, won't you? That's a dear paw!"

"Rather a dear Lucy, too, seems to me!" Redfern observed, the smile deepening.

"Kin you guess what I've come fer?"

"Me! Why, how could I?"

She opened her pale eyes to their fullest extent, as she asked the question.

"You know Cactus, I reckon?"

"Captain Cactus? Oh, yes; I know him very well by sight."

A faint blush suffused her pale face.

"I reckon you know this hyer young Grimshaw, too?"

He eyed her closely as he asked this second question.

"I've seen him."

"Well, there's a plot betwixt this Grimshaw and Capt'n Cactus to ruin me. Cactus pretended he wanted to buy the Calamity, and had me come to his office with the papers. When he

got me in there he pulled a gun on me and held me while Grimshaw copied 'em."

Redfern's voice assumed a savage tone, as he recalled these incidents; and Lucy's eyes opened still wider, if possible.

"I can't tell you just how it'll hurt me; but if I don't git them copies back I'm a ruined man."

"How can I aid you?" she asked, knowing now that he wanted her to assist him in some manner.

"There won't be any more silk dresses er gold brooches an' rings an' sich, if I don't git them papers back!" he continued, paying no heed to her question.

"After he'd got the papers in his hands Grimshaw started fer Pan-out, intendin' to put this matter—which, as I said, I can't explain to you just now—into the courts. I couldn't 'low that, nohow, and so I got some of the boys to stop him and carry him off into the hills until we could make arrangements with Cactus to have the hull business dropped."

"There is something wrong about the papers, then, paw?" Lucy questioned.

"What I want you to do is to go to Cactus," continued her father, again paying no attention to her interruption, "and tell him that we've got his friend the notary, safe and sound, and intend to keep him until he turns over them copies."

The cat was out of the bag and Redfern breathed easier.

"But you've no right to hold Mr. Grimshaw!" protested the daughter, with some slight show of spirits.

"Might makes right, my dear!" Redfern answered doggedly. "I've got to do it er go under."

Lucy's face flushed and she turned to the window to hide the new emotion that leaped into her changeful breast.

Her father watched her keenly, wondering what would be her answer to his request. He had fully made up his mind to use force, if necessary, but greatly preferred to carry his point by conciliatory means.

"What do you say?" he at last growled, becoming impatient at her delay.

"I'll do it, paw!" she said, turning on him with a suddenness that quite destroyed his equanimity.

"If you will I'll git you all the silk dresses and brooches in town!" he declared, actually trembling, now that the nervous strain was removed. "Tell Cactus we won't hurt his friend, but we must have them papers—that's a good girl!"

"When shall I go?" she asked, looking again from the window and impatiently tapping the carpet with her foot.

"This minnit, if you want to!" he cried. "The sooner the better."

She turned once more to the glass and began to arrange her hair, and Redfern, seeing the interview was at an end, hurried down-stairs to convey the glad tidings to Jakie Solomon.

Lucy Redfern loosened her hair and let it fall down her back, then brushed it and began coaxing it again into shape, as was her wont. But her hands trembled and she was so agitated and confused that she seemed not at all satisfied with her work, after it was completed, and went over it all again.

An hour later, radiant in silks and smiles, she swept down-stairs and proceeded to the office of Captain Cactus. The pawn-shop was closed and Peppermint was nowhere to be seen. So she climbed the little stairway that ran along the side of the building and a few moments later tapped softly on the door of Cactus's office.

"Come in!" cried that individual, after his usual fashion. "Ah! Miss Redfern, pardon me. I should have opened the door. I suppose it merely some gentleman."

He moved a chair into place for her as he said this.

She seemed flushed and breathless and he placed a glass of light wine, with an accompanying glass of water, on the table before her.

"Some prefer the wine and some the water," he explained. "I seldom use wine myself, but I keep it by me. You are fatigued and it may refresh you."

"Thank you!" she replied. "I don't care for either, now. I came on a commission from my father."

Cactus inclined his head, as if prepared to listen to what she might have to say.

"Mr. Grimshaw has been captured and is now a prisoner in the hills."

"Ah!"

Cactus raised his eyebrows slightly and his tone carried a question in it.

"Yes. I regret to say that my father was

concerned in this capture; in fact, that he planned it. It seems that you have in your possession copies of some papers which are very important to him. The capture of Grimshaw was made, as I understand it, so that he might ask these copies in return for Grimshaw's release."

She had hurried along at a breathless rate, and now stopped, as if hesitating how to proceed.

"And these papers, Miss Redfern—what does your information lead you to believe them to be?"

"I have no information whatever on the subject, except that they relate to the Calamity Mine," she replied, picking nervously at the feather-edged fan she carried.

"I did not think, Miss Redfern, that you would lend yourself to any unlawful scheme!"

Cactus's voice was grave and measured and he looked earnestly at the flushed face before him and at the droop of the downcast eyes.

"I had quite a high opinion of your womanly character," he continued, in the same measured tones. "A very high opinion; and I am loth to relinquish it. You have served me well on one or two occasions and I was led to believe that you were really my friend."

The look on Lucy Redfern's face grew actually painful.

"Does your father know that we have had a speaking acquaintance?"

"I—I believe not!" she faltered, scarcely able to control her voice.

"Then, of course, he cannot know that you have ever been friendly toward me or in any way aided me. When, by means of Polly Pigeon and Grimshaw, you informed me of the intimate relations existing between your father and Jakie Solomon and warned me to be on my guard against them, you won for yourself a high place in my esteem."

"And, again, when you sent me that note, telling me that Solomon and your father were plotting against me, although you did not know the exact nature of their plotting, you raised yourself still higher in my respect."

"These recollections prompt me to ask another question: Is your father aware of the intimacy existing between Grimshaw and Miss Pigeon?"

"I—I think he is."

Lucy Redfern shook as with an ague fit, as she stammered forth her reply.

"You are friendly to Miss Pigeon, I believe. Would it not, Miss Redfern, be more in accordance with your character, as I have learned to know it, for you to assist in securing his release by legitimate means rather than to lend yourself to the carrying out of a cunningly-devised scheme?"

"I suppose you are aware that, in the eye of the law, those who have a guilty knowledge of a crime or who in any way aid the perpetrators either before or after its commission are accounted accomplices and held equally culpable. Looking at it in that light, I am surprised that you should consent to be the bearer of a message from men who, in acknowledging the kidnapping of Grimshaw, are confessed law-breakers;—even though one of them is your own father."

Lucy Redfern could stand no more. Her poor, weak little heart could not bear such biting words from Captain Cactus. She had meant to aid him, when she consented to visit him, but she had not intended to lay bare the precious secret she carried hidden away beneath the deepest pulsings of her foolish heart.

Yes; Lucy Redfern loved Captain Cactus. Day after day, from her little window, she had watched for his appearance in the street. Scores of times had she come into the bar-room, ostensibly to assist Polly Pigeon, that she might listen to the music of his voice. But she had confided her secret to no one.

It was not a deep, abiding love. She had so loved before, when enslaved by a passing fancy. But while it held sway in her heart she was led captive by it. It was as deep and constant an affection as her vacillating nature was capable of. It might be banished next week by a new idol; but now she felt sure she would love only Captain Cactus while life lasted.

So it was that his words rankled in her bosom like poisoned arrows and drove her to the verge of madness.

"Oh, captain!" she cried, falling on her knees before him, while the tears trickled down her cheeks like rain, "you do not understand me. Do not talk to me that way. You will kill me! I know I am weak and foolish and unwomanly, but I can't stand it to listen to such cruel words from you."

"Indeed, captain, I meant to aid you. I didn't know how to say it; but I'll do whatever

you want me to do, if you'll only tell me what it is."

"I am ashamed to confess it, but I have loved you, worshiped you ever since I first saw you. You will despise me for it, I know you will. You would do right, if you should throw me into the street. I meant to keep still. I meant to hide this away forever. Only for your words to-day I never would have spoken. I know I shall go away from here wishing I was dead."

"But indeed, captain, I intended to help you. I have plenty of money which father has settled on me, in my own name. A fortune for both of us. Give up those papers and we can leave here with Grimshaw and Polly and go where we will never hear of this wicked town again."

A pained look had overspread Cactus's face, as she poured forth this torrent of words. It was to him an unexpected revelation, and as painful as unexpected.

"Calm yourself, Miss Redfern!" he said, assisting her to her chair. "You are not yourself to-day. You are unduly excited and nervous, and have allowed yourself to say things which, in your calmer moments, your mind will not indorse. I am sorry if anything I have said has been the cause of this. I am very much older than you in fact, old enough to be your father."

"I knew you would despise me!" she exclaimed, hysterically.

"Indeed, Miss Redfern, you wrong yourself. I could not despise any one who had shown herself to have such sympathies as I know you to possess. You are hysterical. When you recover your usual calmness, you will look at these things in a very different light, I am sure."

He spoke with all the kindness of a father, and Lucy Redfern was quieted by his soothing tone.

"We will not talk of this matter further. Simply say to your father that what he asks is impossible."

She had arisen to her feet and he now held the door open for her to depart.

She said not a word, as she turned to go, but drew her veil closely about her face and, sobbing as if her heart would break, went slowly down the stairs.

CHAPTER IX.

SOLOMON PRESSES HIS SUIT.

WHILE Lucy Redfern was on her knees before Captain Cactus, revealing the secrets of her weak and changeful heart, Jakie Solomon leaned lightly against the bar of the Sierra Saloon, talking glibly to pretty Polly Pigeon.

At that hour in the morning the usual run of thirsty customers were at work in the mines or on their individual claims and the bar was generally deserted.

As usual, Solomon was faultlessly arrayed. There was, perhaps, too great a display of watch-chain and jewelry and the colors of his necktie were too nearly allied to the tints of the rainbow, for Solomon was something of a fop; but his clothing fitted neatly and displayed his well-molded form to perfection.

Polly was not at her best. She had been washing a tray of glasses, and held a damp cloth in her hand, and her sleeves were tucked above her dimpled elbows.

Nevertheless, she presented an attractive picture. She was radiant with health and simple beauty. Her attire, though plain, was neat, and the knots of wild flowers at her throat and in her hair became her charmingly; and Solomon, as he noted these points, was more than ever enamored.

"You are looking most egcellend, Miss Bolly!"

As he ventured this compliment, he ran the fingers of his sound hand along the black line of mustache that shaded his upper lip, and beamed on her with a complaisant smile.

"That's as people choose to look at it," she answered, laughingly, for what woman does not appreciate a compliment? "Some, no doubt, would think me hideous."

"They would egsipit a gread lack ofe daste, Miss Bolly! Dose vlowers pecomes you petter as chewelry. Bud I must gonvess you look most egcellend, no madder vot you vear. I vould vish dot my vife mighd haf egual apilidies in dot vay."

"Do you suppose you will ever possess such an article?" she asked, archly.

"Do I subbose, Miss Bolly? Vy, I know dot; unt dot vomans, I t'inks me, I haf my eye on dis minnid."

"Oh, you do!"

There was a touch of scorn in the tone.

"Vy nod, Miss Bolly? I haf more money as

I know vot to do mit. I haf no gonnections. My wife coult holt her he't ub mit t'e guen, if necessary."

"It is true your wife might, but her name will not be Polly Pigeon!"

She tossed her head saucily, as she made the declaration.

"Ofe gourse nod, afder she is marriert. Her name vout den pe Mrs. Chacob Solomon. Pevore dot I hobe her name mighd pe Bolly Bigeon."

Solomon parted his red lips in what he intended should be a most attractive smile.

"Why don't you make love to Miss Lucy, Jakie? You might have better luck there. She changes her fancies at every change of the moon, and you might slip into her good graces, some time. Mind, I don't say you would, for Lucy's a sensible girl in most things."

Solomon winced under this stroke, but his smiling face showed not a trace of it.

"She is a goot girl, Miss Bolly. I haf ferry gread respects for her. Bud sdill, I vout nod vant her for a wife. I vout choose a vomans dot haf some sbirid apowet her, unt a mint ofe her own."

"Which her name is Polly Pigeon?" with a light laugh and a flourish of the damp cloth.

"Etzadly so!"

"But you know I told you, Jakie, that you were wasting your valuable time when you insisted on paying your respects to me!"

"Unt I gif you more dime to t'ink apowet dot, you know!"

"I don't want to hurt your feelings, Mr. Solomon!" she said, dropping her bantering manner. "I have told you more times than I can remember that it is utterly useless for you to talk this way to me. I won't marry you! I have thought it over and thought it over, and that is my answer. If you gave me a year to think about it, still it would be my answer."

"Gan I nod say somet'ings or do somet'ings to shange your mint on dis subject?"

His face flushed and there was a trace of anger in his dusky, black eyes.

"I will leave the room, Mr. Solomon, if you continue this!" she cried, angrily. "I thought to laugh you out of your silly notion. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but I won't hear any more."

"I coult guess who vas t'e stumpling-plock in t'e trail!" he exclaimed, looking her full in the eyes.

"Needn't put yourself to so much trouble, Mr. Solomon. I shan't thank you for it."

"I know who is dis younk veller dot valks mit you dot rifferite py!"

She turned on him with a startled look.

"What do you mean?"

"Vos it nod nighd pevore last dot I zee Miss Bolly Bigeon unt dis younk notairy, site py site valking peneat' dose drees?"

"Jakie Solomon, you're a meaner man than I took you to be! You're not only a villain, but you're a sneaking spy."

Solomon cowered visibly before the scorn of her fine eyes.

"Id vos py chance I see dis!" he hastened to explain.

"No explanations are necessary, Mr. Solomon. You're not only a spy, but you're a coward. A brave man would not stoop to such a thing."

"Yes; I was walking by the river with Mr. Grimshaw. What are you going to do about it?"

Her words angered him and, as usual, he lost his customary discretion.

"I shall bud a s'job do id!" he hissed.

"Oh, you will? When were you appointed my guardian? if I may be permitted to ask the question."

"Id is Retvern's vish dot you shall nod as-sosbiade mit low-town vellers like dis notairy."

"Then it is Redfern who is my guardian! I suppose that, in secret conclave and judging other men by the purity of your own lives, you have decided who are 'low-down fellers' and who are not, and I am to be guided accordingly."

Words cannot reveal the withering scorn conveyed by the tone of her voice and the flash of her eyes.

"Id is his vish dot you shoult marry me!" insisted Solomon, trying to control his rapidly rising anger.

"And I say I won't! So, there now! All the Redferns in the world can't make me do it, either."

"Somet'ings else mighd vetch you 'rout!"

There was a threat in the peculiar emphasis Solomon laid on his words, and Polly looked at him inquiringly.

"You t'ink dot is nod bossiple, eh? Vell, ve vill see. Ven dis notairy, mit a robe around his neck asks you do marry me do safe his live, maype you vill shange your mint on dis question."

"Bah! I do not fear your threats!" she cried. "If you ever lay your hand on Mr. Grimshaw he will make you repent of it."

"You vill nod veel so cay, maype, ven I dell you dot Crimshaw is now in my bower."

Polly Pigeon turned a shade paler, but her air was as defiant as ever.

"He vos gaptured py men I haf employed for dot burbose unt is now a brisoner in t'e hills."

"Jakie Solomon, you are lying to me!"

"So hellup me cracious, if I ton'd sbeak t'e troot!"

Polly grasped the bar to keep him from noticing the trembling that took possession of her.

"Now that you have him, what will you do with him?"

This was the question the Jew wished her to ask.

He leaned over and looked closely into her paling face.

"If you vill gonsent do marry me, he gan go vree. If nod, he vill hank py t'e neck, so sure as my name is Chakie Solomon!"

Polly felt as if she must sink to the floor. But she summoned all her courage to the rescue. The color again came to her cheeks, the fire leaped into her eyes and, as she drew herself proudly erect before him, she cried, defiantly:

"Do your worst, Jakie Solomon! I love Frederick Grimshaw better than my own life; yet, even to save him from death, I would not sacrifice myself by marrying you. He would scorn me for even entertaining such a proposition."

Lucy Redfern had passed some time before, on the way to her room; and, as Polly uttered this defiance, she hastily quitted the bar and followed her, leaving Solomon to gnaw his red lips in impotent rage.

Lucy had thrown herself across the bed and, when Polly entered, was moaning as if her heart would break.

"What is it, dear?" Polly asked, putting her arms around her neck.

Then Lucy poured out her heart in confession to Polly Pigeon and together they mingled their tears.

When the paroxysms of Lucy's humiliating grief had somewhat subsided, Polly detailed what had just taken place in the bar-room.

Solomon's account of why Grimshaw was held a captive differed materially from that given by Redfern; and Lucy became so deeply interested as almost to forget her own troubles.

"And now I have a plan by which I think we can effect Fred's release!" said Polly, in conclusion. "I know where this rendezvous is. I learned it from a map of the hills, which your father dropped, one day, by accident. It is a secret cave and is barely five miles from here. The map was drawn by Solomon, for the explanations are in his handwriting."

"I believe that together we can succeed; and do you know, dear, that you could do nothing that would raise you higher in the estimation of Captain Cactus? It would almost repair your blunder of to-day."

"Do you think so?" asked Lucy, lifting her tear-swollen face from the pillow in which it had been buried.

"I feel sure of it!" Polly answered.

"But I am such a cowardly, little goose!" protested Lucy. "I will go, though, if you say I ought."

"Well, then, we may consider it settled!" cried Polly, rising to her feet. "Leave the planning to me, and we will make the attempt this very night."

CHAPTER X.

IN THE LION'S DEN.

"WHOA, consarn ye! Yeou've got me lost from the trail, an' naow I'll have to wander in this 'ere wilderness fer the next forty years, I reckon. What did yeou run away fer? Wusn't the road plain enough? Hanged, ef I don't hope yeou'll have tew eat sage-brush fur a hull week."

"Hello! what's that?"

The muzzle of a rifle appeared above a rock a short distance away, followed a moment later by the person of Jimmy Sullivan.

"Arrah, now! Phat ye doon here?" he shouted. "Take yerself out o' this, or be the powers, it'll be the worse fer ye!"

"Whoa, Jakie! Whoa! Easy naow. Didn't you never see a gun afore?"

The burro had commenced to prance alarmingly, and seemed on the point of pitching.

"Whoa, naow! Thet's a good boy. The gentleman'll not hurt ye."

"Phat do yees be wantin' here?" cried Sullivan, eying Peppermint suspiciously.

"I'll git away frum here as fast as this mule'll carry me, ef yeou'll only show me the way."

There was a ludicrous whine in the voice of the Pilgrim from Pan-out, and he jerked viciously at the heavy bit, for the burro was commencing to rear and plunge.

"Will yeou tell me the way tew Pan-aout? I keep a pawn-shop in the town above, an' started fer Pan-aout this mornin', but through the contrariness of this brute I lost my way."

"Pan-out, is it?" asked Sullivan, lowering his rifle and advancing. "The thrail lies jist beyant. If yees'll go to the rock that lies forninst the mouth av the canyon, ye'll foind the thrail aisy enuff."

"So yees air the chap that's to the fore wid the pawn-shop? A rushin' bizness ye be doin', no doubt. An' phat moight yer name be? It's shlipped my mimory entoirely!"

The burro, that had shown signs of fright at Sullivan's first appearance, now began to pitch with a viciousness that can be appreciated only by those who have witnessed such a performance.

First its heels would go skyward. Then it would appear to be trying to walk on its hind legs. The next moment it would leap sideways, with the agility of a cat, or bound straight up into the air, lower its head between its fore legs and come down stiff-legged, with a shock that would shake the ground.

All this time the Pilgrim from Pan-out continued to cajole and revile it, in ludicrous alternations.

"Whoa, naow, Jakie! Show the gentleman yer good manners, can't yeou? Is this 'ere the-way yeou—treat—me fer the kindness—I've showed yeou? Whoa, consarn—it! Yeou ain't afeared—of a gun—I—reckon! Stan' in—one—place a minnit—won't—yeou, till I kin git a—better holt? The gentleman—I'll think yeou're—a-practicin'—fer a—circus! Whoa—I say! Whoa-a-a! Whoa-a-a!"

"Let me git hould o' his bridle, wonst!" ventured Sullivan, coming nearer.

He reached out his hand to grasp the rein; but the burro had no intention of being caught. He wheeled about with startling suddenness, leaped high into the air, and dashed wildly down the canyon, leaving Peppermint groaning helplessly on the rocks.

"Oh-h! Oh-h! I'm done fer!" he moaned, as he vainly essayed to rise. "My hip's broke clean in tew, I reckon. Smashed plum into giblets."

"Ma'm said, when I left Varmount, thet I'd git killed afore I got back; and hanged ef I don't b'leeve it. Thet comes frum startin' tew Pan-aout on a pesky, no-'caout mule. Oh, cricky! How my hip hurts. I bet my pawn-shop'll be robbed, ef I don't git back by ter-morrer."

"Air yees hurt much?" asked Sullivan, advancing to where Peppermint lay.

"I dew believe my hip-bone's bu'sted intew knittin'-needles."

"Arrah, now, that's bad! The capt'in's away an' it does be puzzlin' me to know what to do wid yees. He war here not an hour sence an' won't be back ag'in till to-morrer evenin'. He give sthricht ordhers not to let anny wan into the cave whin he was away, an' to shoot anny wan that thried to git in. Ye didn't be seein' the capt'in when ye kem t'rough the hills?"

The only answer was a groan.

"It wouldn't be the dacint thing to let 'im lay out here on the rocks!" the Irishman mused, as he looked earnestly into the face of Peppermint, who had apparently fainted.

He put his fingers to his lips and blew a shrill blast, and a few minutes later a half-dozen men came scrambling through the bushes and over the boulders that concealed the mouth of the cave.

"The felly war lost frum the thrail, an' his burro got scairrut at me whin I kem out to halt 'im an' rin away. It's badly brooded he is, an' a leg broke, I'm thinkin'. Ye'll carry him widin' an' we'll see phat's the matther."

As Jimmy Sullivan was in supreme command in McClure's absence, the men proceeded to obey.

"Oh, ouch!" yelled Peppermint, coming to his senses, as they essayed to lift him to their shoulders. "Fer the love o' goodness, don't tech thet hip ag'in! It feels jist like yeou wus jabbin' a knife intew it."

At this they handled him with more care, and bore him slowly into the cave.

It was simply a rough cavern, of irregular proportions and considerable extent. The floor

was composed of fine, white sand. Around the walls were a number of cots, covered with blankets and skins, while guns and pistols swung from almost every projection.

A bright fire was blazing at the further end and around it were seated several members of this gang of outlaws, who acknowledged Silas McClure as their captain and Jakie Solomon as their leading spirit and genius of evil.

Apart from this group sat Frederick Grimshaw, his countenance plain showing a troubled spirit.

He started to his feet, as Peppermint was borne helplessly within and would have rushed at once to his assistance had not a look from the latter restrained him.

That look said as plainly as words—

"As you value your life and mine, do not pretend to recognize me."

Grimshaw sunk lazily back into his place and turned partially toward the wall to conceal the wild thrill of hope that he knew would in spite of his best endeavors show itself in his face.

"Easy naow!" cautioned Peppermint, as his bearers lowered him to the sandy floor. "Seems tew me I kin feel the bones a-grindin' together in that hip like corn atwixt mill-burrs."

Then his clothing was stripped from him and an examination made by Sullivan of the injured limb.

There was a contusion, which, however, did not seem serious; but no bones were broken.

"Yees air not in a bad way, at all, at all!" assured the Irishman, when he had finished the examination. "There's a brooze loike, but no bones broke. Ye'll come around in less'n a wake, ye may take my wurrud fer it. Ye'll have to kape still fer the matter av a day or two, d'ye moind; then ye'll be walkin' as sphry as a young gyurl wid her first swateheart."

"I tell yeou, naow, the bone's broke!" protested Peppermint. "I kin feel it a-grindin' when I move my leg."

"If it war broke yees couldn't move yer leg!" Sullivan assured him.

"Well, it's cracked, then. I know it's cracked, fer I kin feel it. Don't tech it!"

His words ended in a shriek, as Sullivan again placed his hand on the injured hip.

"It's yerself that's cracked!" the Irishman observed with a smile, as he completed this second examination.

"Ye moind me av the man that thought he wor a cow. He'd ate grass an' beller; an' wonst whin thryin' to lape a fence he hurrut his wrist. Afther that he'd kape sayin' that wan ov his fore-legs was broke an' wantin' thim to shoot him, fer the r'ason that a cow wid a broken leg had sorry a chance ov gittin' well."

Peppermint smiled faintly at the Irishman's illustration and then lay back as if weary of the unequal contest.

Grimshaw, watching him narrowly, could scarcely believe that this was only consummate acting; and more than once narrowly escaped revealing the secret of their acquaintance, so real did Peppermint's agonies seem. But that look restrained and held him silent.

"Could I hire one o' yeou to go aout an' ketch thet mule?" Peppermint asked after a few minutes of silence, opening his eyes as if coming out of a sleep.

"The burro is it?" Sullivan ejaculated.

"I'm afeard I'll lose him. I fetched thet mule clean frum Varmount an' I'd never dare to go back there 'thout him."

"He'll foind his way back to the stables, ye kin rest on that!" Sullivan assured. "I shouldn't think yees'd be wantin' to see him ag'in, afther the thrick he sarved ye. Betther thrade him fer a dog an' thin shoot the dog. Ye'll be makin' money by that same."

"Ain't any o' yeou goin' tew town, I reckon?" Peppermint feebly asked, after another interval of silence. "'Cause ef you air I wisht yeou'd put up thet shetter on the left hand winder. I left in sech a hurry this morning thet I pium fergot it."

There was no reply to this and he again relapsed into silence.

After a time Sullivan went out to relieve the sentinel he had placed on duty; and the outlaws disposed themselves in easy attitudes and played cards or slept.

Peppermint also slept a portion of the time and then the day wore slowly away—so slowly to Grimshaw who longed intensely for the coming of darkness.

A bountiful supper was served them, of which Peppermint partook with evident relish although protesting all the while that he had no appetite and thus even if he had his hip pained him so he could not eat.

When the shadows had so wrapped the cave

as to conceal their movements, Peppermint rolled softly to the point where Grimshaw was lying and placing his lips to his ear, whispered:

"Yeou're a-keepin' a staout heart in yeou, I reckon? Yeou'd art tew, fer the sake o' Polly."

"Have you seen her? Is she well?" Grimshaw questioned eagerly.

"Yes; but not quite so laoud!" cautioned Peppermint. "Yeou must remember thet we're amongst the Philistines. Polly's all right, an' we'll be all right, tew, purty quick naow, ef nuthin' purvents. Yeou kin travel, I reckon?"

"Then you were not hurt at all! Your burro threw you, though, didn't he?"

Peppermint laughed softly.

"Thet's a trick o' Jakie's. I wus three months a-learnin' it tew him. Ruther cute fer a mule, naow, ain't it? I wusn't hurt. Got a little bruise onto my hip-bone, but it don't amamount tew nothin'."

There was a commotion at the entrance and the voice of Jakie Solomon was heard in loud command.

"Great Jewpiter, ef 'tain't Moses!" exclaimed Peppermint in evident alarm. "Wusn't expectin' of him. I'll have tew crawl back tew my place an' git my leg intew shape fer handlin'."

CHAPTER XI.

AT BAY.

AFTER his last repulse by Polly Pigeon, Solomon was in no very amiable mood and stood for a long time at the bar, gnawing at his red lips and scowling fiercely into the deserted street.

Then, as if having reached a satisfactory conclusion, he went to his own room, disrobed and tumbled into bed. He had been up almost the entire night; and was soon asleep and slept as dreamlessly as if his soul had never been stained by crime.

About sunset he ordered a horse from the livery stable and rode forth on the Pan-out trail. He intended to visit the cave and see Grimshaw, though he had no very definite idea as to the action to be taken when he got there.

He was in a savage humor and rode at a furious pace.

His hail was answered by Jimmy Sullivan, who, when he found out who the visitor was, came out to meet him and narrated the incidents of the day.

"Dis Chosh Bebbermint is a sby!" exclaimed Solomon fiercely. "Vere is McClure? I vill haf to tearn him off for leafin' t'e gamp in charge of sooch a plockhe't!"

Sullivan resented the words and replied angrily that he ought not to employ blockheads to do his dirty work.

"I bay you vell for id, ton'd I?" Solomon demanded. "If you ton'd like t'e work or t'e vaches you gan kvit—unt I vill see dot you has a robe around your neck pevore t'e veek is owet!"

Crushed and humbled by the threat Sullivan led the way into the cave and pointed out the figures of Peppermint and Grimshaw, at the further end.

Solomon plucked a lighted torch from a niche in the wall and strode angrily forward.

"Gid ub here!" he cried, giving Peppermint a sounding kick in the ribs.

"Whoa, Jakie! Quit yer buckin', will yeou? Drat thet mule!"

"I'll make you t'ink I'm a shackass pevore I gid t'rough mit you!" Solomon cried, giving him another kick.

"Fer goodness sakes, mister, go it a little easy, can't yeou?" Peppermint exclaimed, arousing himself as if from sleep. "Seems tew me I never seen sich reckless critters. What air yeou tryin' to bu'st in my ribs fer?"

"I'll pu'st in your he't, if you ton'd vake ub burty kvick, I gan dell you!"

"Well, ef 'tain't Moses!"

Peppermint attempted to sit up as he made this apparent discovery, but sunk back moaning:

"Great Joshua! I fergot all abaout thet hip."

"Vy dit you come here?" asked Solomon, frowning.

"Yeou'll have to go up head, Moses, fer blamed ef I kin answer thet question. I started fer Pan-out."

"Dot's a lie!" snarled the Jew. "You game here to release dis Crimshaw."

"It's easy 'nuff tew call a man a liar when he's flat o' his back an' can't help hisself!" Peppermint observed.

He wished to increase Solomon's anger, hoping it might open a loophole of escape, for he had seen enough of the Jew to know that when intensely angry he usually lost his discretion.

At the same time he was aware that this might call down on his head unknown dangers.

"Yeou're nod hurd!" sneered the Jew, kicking him on the hip he claimed was broken.

"Oh! ouch!" howled Peppermint. "Ef yeou do thet ag'in, Moses, I'll kill yeou, ef I ever git aout o' this cave alive!"

"You'll nod gid owet ofe here alive, I bromise you!" with another vicious kick.

To this Peppermint made no reply; only gritting his teeth and drawing his breath hard, as the toe of the boot struck him.

Again and again the blows descended and, after kicking the Pilgrim from Pan-out into apparent insensibility, Solomon turned to Grimshaw, who had been staring, open-eyed, upon the strange scene.

"I subbose you haf a proken hib, doo!" giving Grimshaw a kick. "Gid ub. I vant to look in your vace unt see vot Miss Bolly Bigeon gan vint so pudiful apowet it."

Grimshaw stubbornly refused to rise.

"You von't, hey? Gif me dot horse-whip on t'e vall, some ofe you."

Sullivan, quite humbled by his chief's savage demeanor, hastened to obey.

"Now you vill rise or I shall sboil dose pudiful veatures, I bromise you!" Solomon cried, threateningly, as he cracked the whip to test it, using his left hand quite as well as he might have used his right.

A moment later the lash whistled through the air and descended squarely on Grimshaw's face, leaving a blood-red mark.

Again the circling lash cut the air.

It was more than human nature could tamely endure. With a hoarse cry Grimshaw leaped upon his assailant. There was a struggle, a fall and they rolled together upon the sandy floor.

Grimshaw had twisted his left hand into the Jew's collar and with his right hand now proceeded to rain blow after blow upon the upturned face.

Sullivan hurried to his chief's assistance and the young notary was dragged off.

The blood streamed from Solomon's nose as he scrambled to his feet, wild with rage.

"Gif me dot vhip! Holt heem somepoty! Die him. I vill learn heem a lesson he vill nod vorgid righd away."

Headless of the blood which streamed upon the bosom of his white shirt, making him a figure ghastly to look on, he picked up the whip from the sand, where it lay half-buried, and again advanced on Grimshaw.

It was well for the Jew that the young notary had been disarmed when captured or he would then have paid for his cruelty with his life.

Grimshaw had retreated against the rocky wall and now stood in an attitude of threatening defiance.

It was a strange scene; the unnatural gloom of the cave, relieved only by the flickering torches; the apparently insensible form of Peppermint; the crowd of sullenly-brutal outlaws gathered in a semicircle about the malignant Jew and his unfortunate captive.

Again Solomon advanced, the whip circling above his head. It never reached its intended mark. Grimshaw leaped forward with the agility of a panther. His right foot shot out. The toe of the heavy boot caught the Jew under the chin, lifting him from his feet and hurling him to the floor insensible.

There was a rush of outlaws to the assistance of their chief. Sullivan lifted the Jew's head on his knee and forced some whisky between his lips and chafed the pallid face.

Grimshaw had retreated again to the wall.

In a few minutes Solomon opened his eyes and a moment later sat up, weak and giddy, but as malignant as ever.

But he had learned a lesson and did not again offer to approach the young notary.

He swallowed the glass of liquor which Sullivan held for him. It brought strength to his limbs and recalled the courage to his heart.

"Die heem!" he hissed, his crouching figure and black eyes making him look, in the dim light, like a coiled serpent; and the crunching of the sand, as he shifted his position, carried the resemblance still further, for it sounded not unlike the vibrating skr-r-r of a rattlesnake.

"Die dem bote! So hellup me cracious, if I ton'd vhip t'e skin loose vrom der neck to der heels!"

Sullivan secured a cord and advanced to obey the command.

The young notary, however, had made up his mind not to submit to further indignities at the hands of Solomon.

The excitement into which the group had been thrown seemed to offere a chance of escape. Desperate, it is true, but still a chance;

and he determined to avail himself of it. He could die but once.

So, when Sullivan approached, he dashed him to the earth, and, with a wild cry, leaped through the semicircle of outlaws and fled like a deer toward the entrance.

There was an instant commotion. A rattling volley of pistol-shots echoed thunderously through the cavern; and, with shouts and yells, the outlaws darted in pursuit.

In another moment the cave would have been emptied had not Solomon thrust a cocked revolver into the hands of Jimmy Sullivan and ordered him, as he valued his life, not to let Peppermint go.

In the mean time the young notary had gained the open air.

A vain search for him through the surrounding hills was led by Solomon in person. All night long he kept it up, with a relentless and dogged perseverance.

In addition, runners were dispatched to watch the trails entering Sierra City. These were able to report better success; and, just as the first faint streakings of day appeared over the crests of the distant mountains, they returned, driving Grimshaw before them with cruel blows and curses.

CHAPTER XII.

A MURDEROUS DEED.

"DURNED if I like to kill a man in cold blood!"

It was Redfern who made the objection, and he was speaking to Jakie Solomon.

They were seated in Solomon's little room in the rear of the Sierra Saloon; that room in which so many villainous plans had been concocted.

Solomon had just returned from the secret cave and had been detailing to Redfern an account of the events already known to the reader.

He had closed the recital with a proposal so fiendish that even Redfern's hardened and brutal nature shrank from its contemplation.

That proposal was no less than the midnight assassination of Captain Cactus.

"I don't mind gittin' the drop on a man when he's awake; but hanged if I like this hyer idee of puttin' a knife into a feller when he don't know nothin'!"

"Maype you vant do grow-vish owet ofe dis pizness aitogedder?" Solomon snarled, in a tone of suspicion.

"I might if I seen any way open!" Redfern admitted.

"Te roat to de benedensherry is as vide oben to-day as it vos last veek! You vill haf to shoos between dem. Ve gan seddle dis Gap-tin Gactus as I brobose; den, mit Crimshaw unt Bebbermint owet ofe t'e vay, id is clear sailing.

"How air you goin' to git 'em out of the way? Stick a knife into them, too?"

"Ton'd let dot drouble you, mine frient," Solomon replied smilingly. "I vill see dot dey are hung vor somet'ings or odder. Ze poys vill addent to any liddle madder like dot, if I gif 'em a vew tollars egstra.

"Mit all dree ofe dem owet ofe t'e vay, ve gan snab ower feengers at dose gourt-houses. If we ton'd do id ve vill lose t'e mine ant run ower he'ts into a halder pesites.

"I am sadisfiet dot Gactus garries dose babers in his bocket. Mit dose babers in ower bossession unt t'e men who haf peen hunting us, de't, ve gan sell dot Calamity Mine unt skib owet ofe here mit a vull bocketpook."

"Blast the job! I wish I'd never tackled it!" Redfern growled. "I ain't had any piece of mind since you first proposed it. And now, after all the dirt we've done, it's murder or failure. Do you know, Jakie, that I half believe our luck's gone back on us? Looks like it, anyway. Who'd ever thought that the very first time I offered the mine fer sale I'd put a club into the hands o' some one to beat our brains out with?"

"I'm certain that this Captain Cactus and the Yankee peddler air buckin' the bank together. I've spicioned Peppermint ever since I first seen him. He ain't half as green as he looks; an' he bothers me more and more every day. If I wasn't cert'in that the dead never come to life I'd feel like I knowed him."

"You gan rest easy on dot boint!" Solomon assured. "T'e de't neffer come pack, I bromise you. Unt dot makes ower success certain unt sure. Mit dese men unter grout ve are safe. If dey lif ve must kvit t'e game; unt t'e sooner t'e petter."

"I tell you, Jakie, I don't like it!" Redfern again protested.

"If you von't come indo t'e thing I vill leaf you to blay a lone hant!" Solomon threatened.

"I gan bull owet easier as you gan."

"And leave me to stand the racket?"

"Dot is vor you to say. I haf not so mooch to lose as you haf. I haf no broberdy died up in dis down."

"What about Polly?" Redfern asked, hoping the Jew's fancy for the pretty bar-maid might be a tie that would prove stronger even than his own love of wealth.

"I leds no vomans bud a robe 'rout my neck!" Solomon assured him. "A tay voutl blace me so var vrom here dot I voutl haf no vears ofe peing daken."

"Can't you do this thing yourself?" Redfern asked, after a minute's thought.

Solomon had no intention of committing such folly. In everything that had been done so far Redfern had seemed the principal actor. The crafty Jew had hidden behind his puppet thinking that if failure came no evidence could be found against him. And then what a hold did his knowledge of Redfern's position give him on that individual!

"I gan, bud I von't! Ve must stant togedder. If ve sugceet ve share equally. If ve vail I ton'd brobose to haf dis whole pizness lait on my shoulters.

"Tere is no tanger, my frient. Dwo ofe us gan cerdainly gid away mit von man ven he is asleeb. If ve gan't, ve mighd as vell gall ower-selves a lod ofe olt vomans. If you ton'd like t'e plooty bart ofe it, you gan stant py me unt hellup, ofe I meed unexpected tiffiguldies. Dot is as vair as I know how to brobose id. In t'e eyes ofe t'e law you vill pe as guildy as me, unt if ve hang vor id, ve vill haf t'e sadisfaction ofe hanging togedder."

"Mighty poor kind of satisfaction, seems to me. I don't like it at all, but I ain't got head enough to see any other way out. If you say it's the only thing we can do, I'll have to consent, I reckon."

"Dake a goot class ofe pranty. Dot vill pud some sbirids into you."

"Spirits of alcohol, eh?" Redfern exclaimed, with a feeble attempt at one of his threadbare jokes. "When air you goin' to try it?"

"To-night! T'e sooner t'e petter, is always my moddo."

With trembling fingers, Redfern emptied the brandy bottle into a glass that stood on the table, and swallowed the contents as if it had been so much water.

The fiery liquor brought the color to his cheeks, and deadened the whisperings of conscience and the fear of the future.

A reckless light crept into his eyes as the fumes of the brandy mounted to his brain.

"To-night it is, then!" he said, rising. "Give me your hand on it. We're in the same boat, an' we'll make the old thing carry us or go down together."

Solomon grasped his hand firmly, well pleased with the effects of his prescription, and side by side they walked out into the bar-room.

Here he pressed another glass of fiery liquor upon Redfern, and then went out into the open air to more thoroughly consider his devilish plans.

Late that evening, on the outskirts of town, he received a report from McClure and gave him some instructions regarding the prisoners.

Then he strolled slowly back along the narrow streets, now filling with men who, in groups of twos and threes, were dropping in from their claims for a night of carousal.

The Jew had a passing acquaintance with many of them, and he nodded blandly as they passed him. Occasionally he came across one of his minions, and conferred stealthily with him in the shadow of the buildings.

He looked into the Sierra Saloon as he went by.

Redfern was busily engaged in administering to the wants of the thirsty throng. He seemed slightly the worse for liquor, and Solomon judged that he had been drinking more heavily than was his custom to prevent his courage from oozing away.

Polly Pigeon and Lucy Redfern were assisting him, and Solomon stopped for a time in the shadow of the house to gloat unobserved upon the charms of his fair but headstrong enslaver.

There was a heightened color in the faces of the young woman, which he did not fail to notice, but for which he could not account.

Then he passed on into his room by the rear entrance.

He did not emerge from it until well on toward morning. The streets were silent, and even the boisterous sots, who always lingered

latest, had stumbled off to the miserable abodes they called homes.

He removed his shoes and crept stealthily into the hall, and thence into the bar-room. The coal-oil lamp, which Redfern always kept burning there, winked drowsily.

He looked anxiously about. Redfern was nowhere to be seen, although that was the agreed place of meeting. His black brows contracted in a frown, as he poked under the bar and searched aimlessly about for the missing man.

Redfern was certainly not there. It took but a minute to convince Solomon of that fact.

Could it be possible that he had ascended to his bedroom, and there fallen asleep, overcome by his too frequent potations?

Solomon answered the question by going up to Redfern's room and examining it. The recreant saloon-keeper was not there either. The condition of the bed showed that it had not been slept in that night.

The frown deepened as Solomon concluded his search. The conviction forced itself on him that, at the last minute, Redfern had left the house to keep from joining in the proposed assassination.

Then, like a flash, came the thought that perhaps Redfern had turned traitor, hoping thereby to escape the penalties of his crimes.

The thought drove him half-mad. His fingers twitched as if in imagination they were grasping Redfern's throat.

Was it possible that his plans were to be thus balked, when they seemed so near consummation? He had gone too far to tamely submit to that.

Redfern a traitor added one more to the list of victims already marked out; and what was one murder more, when three were already contemplated?

Nothing! He would kill Redfern with as little compunction as he would Cactus; and then he could seize the Calamity Mine by means of forged papers, and dispose of it as his own.

"I vill do id!" he hissed, between his grating teeth.

Any one noticing the glare which shone in his eyes, as he made this declaration, would scarcely have known whether to term him a fiend or a madman.

He drew a glittering knife from his belt and stole softly into the street, keeping well in the shadows.

On reaching the little stairway that ran along the side of Peppermint's pawn-shop, he carefully grasped the railing and ascended with cat-like steps.

The door of Cactus's room was unlocked, as he discovered on trying it.

He pushed it open and looked cautiously within. The moonlight streamed in through the window. The form of a man was outlined on the bed, and a decided snore assured Solomon of the soundness of the sleep of his intended victim.

On tip-toe he crept to the bed. An instant the deadly knife hung glistening in the moonlight. Then it descended with a sickening thud.

CHAPTER XIII.

A FOUL ACCUSATION.

REDDY REDFERN was greatly troubled over the part he had agreed to take in the contemplated murder of Captain Cactus; and after Solomon left the bar-room he tossed down glass after glass of fiery liquor, for the purpose of quieting his nerves and confirming himself in the resolve he had taken.

Not that Redfern was a conscientious man by any means; but even the most hardened of criminals naturally shrinks from foul and deliberate assassination.

Redfern's greatest curse was a weak and wavering disposition. This and an inordinate love of money had caused him to fall in readily with Solomon's nefarious plans. Removed from all temptations, and surrounded by incentives to a better life, it is not at all improbable that Redfern would have made a fair reputation for uprightness.

The life he had drifted into and the associations which naturally surrounded it had made him a villain; but lacking the utter heartlessness and base cunning of Solomon.

The frequent potations had the desired effect. His fears and troubled doubts vanished as the liquor took possession of his brain. He began to feel, with Solomon, that the death of Cactus was little more than a necessary evil, and he even persuaded himself into believing that it was a duty he owed to himself and to his daughter.

Cactus out of the way, together with Grimshaw and Peppermint, he saw the road to wealth

lying broad before him. He had already, out of the earnings of the mine, deposited a large sum to Lucy's credit in a reliable bank, thinking that this might be saved, possibly, even if all else failed.

It would not be a difficult matter, as he now looked at it, to dispose of his property in Sierra City. Then, with the additional money to be obtained from the sale of the mine, he could vanish, and, in some far distant place, live like a prince, forgetful of the past and careless of the future.

The deeper he drank the more like certainties did these dreams become; and long before night-fall he was so intoxicated he could scarcely preside at his usual place behind the bar.

After dark Lucy Redfern and Polly Pigeon came down to assist him. They were secretly pleased at his condition, for Polly had imagined that he had been closely watching her during the whole of the past two days.

This belief had prevented them from attempting Grimshaw's release on the night before. Now it seemed not improbable that Redfern would soon become so intoxicated as to relax the vigilance they believed him to be exercising over their movements, and thus they could safely put their plans into execution that very night.

This was the thought that caused the unnatural hightening of color which Solomon, from the shadow of the building, saw and wondered at.

Their suppressed excitement passed unnoticed by Redfern, who continued to soar in the clouds evolved from the brandy fumes. His quickened imagination could now see the deed accomplished, and hear the furor following the discovery; and more than once he chuckled audibly, as he thought of the ease with which the murder could be attributed to burglars.

"Reddy's a-bowlin' up purty lively to-night," was the comment of one miner to another, as, arm in arm, they walked away from the bar. "Don't think I ever seen him quite so fergitful. Blamed if I don't b'lieve he took me fer Jakie Solomon!"

The speaker had ordered brandy and water, and Redfern had pushed across to him a schooner of beer, at the same time murmuring:

"You've got a head fer figgerin', Jakie, an' no mistake!"

As the hours flew by, Redfern gradually became so intoxicated that he could no longer attend to the wants of customers. Realizing his condition, in a dazed and imperfect way, he left the bar in charge of Polly and Lucy, and, seating himself in a chair which he tipped against the wall, he fell into a slumberous condition, from which he awoke by fits and starts, mumbling sentences in which the names of Jakie Solomon and Captain Cactus seemed to predominate.

Polly Pigeon closed the saloon rather early. The noise she made in putting up the shutters aroused Redfern. A look of drunken craftiness came into his eyes as he saw what she was doing, and he again dropped his head as if in sleep.

When at last the room was deserted, he stumbled across to the bar, above which the coal-oil lamp was still shining, and with shaking hand poured out a tumblerful of raw whisky and gulped it down.

This done, he stood for a time supporting himself by the bar and talking wildly and incoherently.

He had almost lost the power to think. The plan, as outlined by Jakie Solomon, became confused and jumbled up in his mind. Sometimes he imagined that he himself was Solomon. But the idea that Cactus must be slain that night was ever uppermost.

At last he staggered to the door leading into the street. This he opened, after much fumbling, and then fell sprawling on the rocky sidewalk.

After two or three ineffectual attempts to rise he again got on his feet, and stumbled blindly to the stairway leading to Cactus's room.

Up this he crawled, a pitiable object indeed, impelled by the insane idea that had taken possession of him. It required fully ten minutes to accomplish the ascent, every minute of which he was in imminent danger of tumbling to the rocks below.

After he had reached the landing, he lay for quite awhile like a log, striving to regain his spent strength. Then he pulled himself up by the railing, drew the sheath-knife he always carried in his belt, and reeled toward the door.

He stumbled as he reached it, precipitating himself head-first within.

The noise of the fall awakened Cactus, who at once sprang out of bed, drawing his weapons as he did so.

To say that he was surprised at finding Red-

fern in his room in that condition, but feebly expresses his feelings. He was astounded beyond measure.

As he advanced toward Redfern, the latter attempted to arise, striking at Cactus with his knife as he did so.

The effort was too much for the now thoroughly drunken man, and he fell back helplessly, the knife slipping from his nerveless fingers.

Cactus lifted him to his feet in the hope that he might be able to get him down-stairs.

"I'm not dr-drunk! (hic)" protested Redfern, drawing himself up and trying to look as sober as possible. "Whasser matter (hic), wis you? Wh-where's Shakie Solomon? Thas wh' (hic), what I wanser know!"

As he said this, he tried to reach the door, Cactus still supporting him. But his legs failed him, and he fell sprawling on the bed which Cactus had just quitted.

In another minute he was snoring.

"Well, this is a nice kettle of fish!" Cactus exclaimed in disgust, picking the sheath-knife up from the floor. "The fellow's lost his head from too much liquor, and has had no more sense than to come up here in that condition to even up old scores."

"I suppose it's a good thing he's as drunk as he is. I'm generally a light sleeper, but I was pretty well fagged out when I went to bed."

"I can't stand that music, certain!"—Redfern was snoring lustily. "He's too heavy to carry down-stairs, and it's plain he can't walk. I guess I'll vacate the room for awhile and let him sleep it out."

Cactus dressed and descended into the street. The air was crisp and invigorating, and he strolled leisurely about in the shadows, enjoying the coolness of the night and thinking over the plans he was engaged in working out.

He knew that Grimshaw was in the power of Jakie Solomon and that Peppermint had gone to attempt his release; but he did not know that Peppermint's plans had miscarried and that he was also at that moment lying bound and helpless in the mysterious cave.

He was aroused from his reveries by a wild cry. It came from his own room and was more like a shriek of anguish than a call for help.

That cry came involuntarily from the lips of Jakie Solomon when he realized that the man he had lifted his knife against was Reddy Redfern and not Captain Cactus.

With a few vigorous bounds Cactus reached the landing and sprang up the stairway, three steps at a time.

With drawn revolver he dashed into the room.

Jakie Solomon stood by the bed, with bloody knife, his eyes rolling wildly in their sockets; while before him, writhing in agony, lay Reddy Redfern, the blood gushing from a ghastly wound in his breast.

At sight of Cactus, Solomon sprang through the door and hurried into the street, still clutching his dripping knife.

Cactus approached the bed, deeply moved. Like intuition the truth had flashed into his mind; but he harbored no ill-will against any man, and certainly none against a man who seemed in his death agonies.

Redfern was insensible. A hasty examination showed that the knife had penetrated the left lung, barely missing the heart. Cactus decided that it was probably fatal; or, at least so serious that only the best treatment and most skillful nursing could pull him through.

The wound was bleeding freely and he proceeded to strip some cloth into bandages, applying them with the skill of a practiced hand. He had succeeded in checking the outward hemorrhages and was thinking of starting for a surgeon when a confused roar of voices reached him.

It came from the street and, on looking from the window, he saw a crowd of excited and armed men advancing. The moonlight revealed them plainly. They were coming with a rush and at their head leaped Jakie Solomon.

"Deré he is now!" yelled Solomon on catching sight of Cactus's face at the window, at the same time discharging his revolver.

The ball struck the sash and Cactus thought it policy to withdraw his head. He also blew out the light he had been using while examining and bandaging Redfern's wound.

"He has murtert Mister Retvern! Ton'd led him gid away. If he dries id shood him town."

The roar grew louder, as Solomon continued to urge on the excited throng, and soon a clatter of feet was heard on the stairway.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE CHAPARRAL COCK ALOFT.

"STOP where you are, gentlemen!"

Cactus had hurried to the door communicating with the stairway, and with a cocked revolver in each hand, held the surging crowd at bay.

"What is it you want? Speak lively, for there is a man in here who needs my attention."

"Town mit him!" yelled Solomon. "Shood him v're he standts!"

He half uplifted his revolver as he spoke.

"I've got the drop on you, Jakie Solomon," said Cactus, coolly. "With this moonlight I couldn't miss you, and if you so much as lift a finger, I'll plug you sure."

In passing from the window to the door he had placed on his head the broad-brimmed white hat, with its plume of cactus; and now, as he uttered this warning, the cactus slowly opened, and the golden image of the chaparral cock perched itself. It was his banner of battle, and when it lifted itself into view, those familiar with Cactus's idiosyncrasies knew that, if forced to it, he meant to fight to the bitter end.

"If you'll listen a moment to reason I can explain matters so that you'll see this in a very different light," he continued, addressing the murmuring crowd.

This was what Solomon did not want, and his heels again raised their deafening cries.

"Dake heem, de't or alife!" he commanded, waving his arms aloft, but not daring to draw the revolver which, at Cactus's warning, he had thrust into his belt.

"It is absolutely necessary that Redfern should have surgical attention. He will die without it!" Cactus shouted, his voice rising thunderously above the tumult. "I do not expect mercy from men led by such a villain as Jakie Solomon. I do not ask it. I stand ready to defend myself. I will shoot the first man who attempts to climb that stairway without my leave. At the same time I do not want Redfern to die here, if a surgeon can save him. Any two of you can come up and carry him to his own room, but you must remove your weapons."

Two of the foremost instantly laid aside their revolvers and prepared to ascend, notwithstanding Solomon's orders to the contrary. They happened to be well-disposed miners, and over such Solomon had little control.

"You don't want Reddy to lay there and die, do you?" asked one of them, whose name was Percy Hudson, at the same time laying his hand on the railing.

"Id's a drick!" Solomon cried, frantically.

"He vill kill you if you go ub dere."

"Oh, I reckon not," Hudson answered, with a sneer. "Seems to me two ag'in' one's a purty fair shake."

Hudson had no friendly feeling for Jakie Solomon, as the latter well knew. He had joined in with the rabble at the first hue and cry, scarcely knowing what it was all about. The offer of an explanation, which had not been heeded, and now this further proposal, together with Cactus's manly bearing, inclined him to the weaker side.

The men in Solomon's employ taking their cue from the objections raised by their leader, again sent up a clamorous shout and weapons were freely drawn.

"We're a-goin' up this stairway!" Hudson exclaimed, wheeling about and defiantly facing the angry mob.

"Come on!" shouted Cactus. "I will see that those fellows don't disturb you."

Thus reassured the two men quickly ascended, passed Cactus and approached the bed.

"He's badly hurt," said Cactus, as they lifted Redfern in their arms, "but I declare to you, on my honor, that I had no hand in it. Jakie Solomon stabbed him, thinking it was me."

He raised his voice so that it was heard in the street and many there turned about and stared suspiciously at the Jew.

"Id's a lie!" shouted Solomon, turning pale.

The men, with their insensible burden, were now on the stairway and the mob instinctively ceased their hootings until Redfern was borne by them and into the saloon.

Then the tumult, led by Solomon's followers, grew louder than ever and it seemed they would attempt to take the house by storm.

The doors of the pawn-shop were broken open, and while some tried to ascend that way others endeavored to climb the stairway outside.

Seeing they would not listen to reason and realizing that he would simply be courted death by further exposure, Cactus retired into the little room, choosing a position where he could guard both stairways and at the same time not be seen until his assailants were near their tops.

Soon a head, surmounted by a sombrero, appeared above the railing of the inner flight and Cactus instantly sent a bullet through the hat.

A yell at the foot of the stairway showed that the ball had also found a human target and the crowd fell back in wild disorder.

Then a volley rung out and a shower of splinters flew about the room. The maddened men were firing through the ceiling, hoping to reach Cactus with a random shot. Faster and faster came the bullets, cutting their way through almost every portion of the floor and becoming a source of real danger.

Fortunately a heavy, iron safe stood against the wall. On this Cactus perched himself, watching the stairways narrowly, but paying no further heed to the shots, except occasionally when one glanced from the side of the safe or struck the bottom with a sounding thump.

For five minutes this rattling fire continued, then all grew quiet. The rascals were listening, hoping to hear the death-groans of their intended victim.

Then there was a whispered consultation and some one began to ascend the stairs. By this time Cactus felt that it was necessary to give them a lesson and when the fellow came into view he sent a bullet through his right shoulder, tumbling him headlong to the floor below.

A howl of rage greeted the shot, and again came the pop, pop of revolvers.

"Shoot away!" cried Cactus mockingly. "You can't hurt me, and might as well get rid of your ammunition that way as any other. I've got iron soles on my shoes!"

"He is on t'e safe!" cried Solomon, who now remembered noticing the safe on his recent visit to the room. "Ve vill haf to burn heem owet!"

As he said this he knocked a coal-oil lamp to the floor, and, as the inflammable oil gushed out, piled some waste on it and applied a match.

His movements were so rapid that the flames leaped up against the wall almost before his followers knew what he intended.

"Burn heem! burn heem!" he cried, in a delirium of fiendish joy. "Ah, ha! Mister Cactus. T'e iron safe vill nod keeb t'e fire away!"

At this juncture Percy Hudson strode angrily into the room. He had been hurrying about town in search of a surgeon, and had just returned.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Town mit heem!" cried Solomon, turning on his questioner. "Town mit Gactus unt all his hellbount frients."

There was a rush and Hudson fighting fiercely was borne back into the street.

A wild tumult was the result. Hudson's friends rallied about him, pistols were drawn and a general fight seemed imminent.

Meanwhile the flames mounted steadily toward the ceiling.

Cactus, hearing their crackling, leaped from the safe, opened it and extracted a roll of money and a package of papers.

Then he peered down the stairway.

The threatened fight had ended in words, and Solomon's men were swarming back into the room.

What to do was now the question. To remain meant almost certain death, and to run that gantlet of revolvers seemed equally desperate.

Then the voice of Hudson was heard again, commanding attention.

"We won't stand by and see any man roasted alive!" he shouted.

At this there was a rush of Solomon's men for the stairway.

The quick rattle of Cactus's revolver told that the hunted man intended to sell his life dearly. He had grown desperate, and now shot to kill, and two of the foremost ruffians threw up their hands and tumbled to the floor lifeless.

This checked the rush, and not all Solomon's urging could induce them to make a second attempt.

"Come on!" shouted Cactus defiantly. "If I'm to die like a rat in a trap, it will give me great pleasure to know that some of my enemies are roasting with me."

The crowd without had been constantly augmenting, and now it seemed the entire populace was gathered in the street.

Among these the friends of Percy Hudson had been industriously circulating, and soon a band of determined men detached themselves from the throng and gathered, with drawn weapons, at Hudson's heels.

"Back, every one of you!" now shouted Hudson, leaping through the smoke to the foot of the stairway, his men ranging themselves in a semicircle about him and facing the villainous followers of Jackie Solomon.

"If this fire is not checked the town will be

burnt. We ask you to stop and think a minute. Cactus is up-stairs, and will be roasted, as he says, like a caged rat. The Sierra Saloon will go, too, and Redfern with it, if he is not got out of there.

"Cactus claims he can prove he ain't guilty. Give him a fair shake!"

A chorus of deafening cheers greeted the proposition.

"Yes; give him a fair shake. Put him in jail and guard him. If he can't prove himself innocent, after a fair trial, hang him."

Another chorus of cheers swelled out on the morning air.

Hudson was gaining ground, and knew it, and continued to demand fair play. Every sentence was greeted with vociferous applause, and Solomon soon saw that he would have to yield or fight.

So, after considerable demurring, he acceded to the demand and Cactus was escorted into the street, where he permitted himself to be bound and marched off to the little jail, around which a strong guard was thrown, more for his protection than anything else.

In the mean time the fire had gained such headway that it was found impossible to check it with the inadequate facilities at hand.

In a half-hour from the time it was lighted the pawn-shop was wrapped in a sheet of flame.

The fire quickly communicated to the Sierra Saloon, making it necessary to again remove Redfern; and, accompanied by the attending surgeon, he was borne to a little building remote from all danger of conflagration.

The play of light on the sky could be seen from the high, barred windows of Cactus's narrow prison. It grew brighter and brighter, although day was at hand; and, climbing upon a stool, he watched the spread of the fire which now threatened the existence of Sierra City.

CHAPTER XV.

MAIDENS FAIR.

WHERE were Polly Pigeon and Lucy Redfern during the time of this wild commotion?

When Polly Pigeon had put up the shutters of the Sierra Saloon she glanced keenly at Redfern, who seemed to be sleeping, and then stole away to Lucy's room.

"Thank Heaven, the coast is clear at last!" she ejaculated, sinking into a chair. "I got a chance to speak to Tom Fagan awhile ago and he will be ready to help us with his men."

"How are we to get there?" asked Lucy, through the hairpins with which her mouth was filled.

"Fagan is to have two horses in waiting at the point where the trail enters Sierra City. Do your hair up, quick! Here, let me help you; it will save time, and we haven't any to lose. It's after midnight now, and it will take us two hours, as rough as the trail is."

Under Polly's deft fingers the braids quickly assumed outline and shape, and when they were coiled becomingly at the back of Miss Lucy's head, that peculiar maiden announced her readiness to start.

Together they hurried by the back way into the now almost-deserted streets, and hastened through the unsightly suburbs. Once beyond the town, they found the horses, which Fagan had picketed by the side of the trail. They were not saddled. Side-saddles were unknown luxuries in Sierra City, and Fagan had feared that men's saddles might be objectionable.

"We can get along very well without!" Polly exclaimed, leaping nimbly to the back of her horse, an example which Lucy unhesitatingly followed.

Then they clattered boldly down the trail in the direction of Pan-out.

A fatiguing ride of nearly two hours brought them to the canyon which led to the secret cave held by Solomon's band of road-agents and cut-throats.

Up to this time Lucy had borne herself with rare courage; but now she began to falter.

A braver heart than hers might well have trembled, knowing what the end of the canyon would reveal.

"Now don't be a goose, Lucy!" Polly protested, although her own nerves were none too firm. "I am certain we shall not be in the least danger. Solomon is asleep in his own room in town, and you know your father is in no condition to do anything. Who, then, could give any warning? Besides, no one but Tom Fagan and his men knows anything about it."

Lucy was silenced; but she felt sure she could hear her heart beat, as the horses turned their heads into the canyon.

They had advanced in that direction but a few minutes, as it seemed, when they were hailed by Jimmy Sullivan.

"Who air yees, an' phat the divil do ye be wantin'?" he cried, from out of the gloom. "Shpake up, er I'll put a bullet into yees, so I will, be gob!"

"Is that you, Jimmy?" Polly asked, riding nearer.

"Troth, an' ye niver guessed fairer! It's Jimmy Sullivan I am; and, be the same token, who might you be?"

"Why, don't you know me?" Polly continued, riding still nearer, while Lucy followed close after. "I'm Polly Pigeon, Mr. Redfern's barmaid, and this is his daughter, Miss Lucy."

Sullivan doffed his cap politely, but did not offer to move from the trail.

"I remember you," he acknowledged, bowing almost to the ground. "Mony's the toime that swate hand that handles a bridle-rein so aisily has pushed a toothful o' mountain dew across the bar to Jimmy Sullivan. But ordhers is ordhers, miss, an' I cyaan't let yees pass."

"What's the row?" demanded McClure, coming from behind the fringe of bushes.

"The leddies, yer 'aner," explained Sullivan, jerking his hand toward them. "They want to come in, I'm thinkin'."

"Oh, Mr. McClure, is that you?" Polly cried, with well-feigned impulsiveness. "You know me, of course; and Lucy, too! I was afraid you wouldn't be here and Mr. Solomon charged me so particularly to see you in person."

The compliment pleased Silas McClure, who had never been a favorite with the ladies, although desperately fond of the sex.

"What is it, Miss Polly?" he hastened to ask. "You come with orders from Solomon, you say?"

"Solomon and Mr. Redfern both!" Polly assured him. "They instructed us how to proceed to get here. I was so afraid of losing the road that Mr. Solomon made a map of the hills for me showing the exact location of the cave. Here it is; you can see it for yourself!" and Polly gave him the map she had found and which she knew to have been made by Solomon.

McClure was no scholar, but not for worlds would he have confessed as much to Polly Pigeon and Lucy Redfern. He took the map, the lower portion of which was covered with explanations almost indefinable in the moonlight, turned it upside down, then held it sideways, thrusting his tongue against his cheek, as he did so, and scratching his frowzy head.

"What do you make of it, Jimmy?" he at last said, holding it under the Irishman's nose.

"Divil a thing can I make av it, at all!" Sullivan acknowledged, squinting one eye and surveying the bit of paper with ludicrous solemnity. "The moonlight do be dazzlin' me so that I cyaan't make out the letthers, but thim surkles moind me av a mill-pond afther you dhrap a lot av rocks into it."

"Oh, Jimmy!" Polly exclaimed, laughing. "Those are mountains."

"Mountains, is it? Then, be gob, this must be a snake crawlin' through thim!"

"That's the river!" Polly corrected, shaking her head wisely. "And this line you see along here is the trail to Pan-out; and here's the canyon, with the cave, at the end of it. It's all explained below."

"I s'pose it's all right!" said McClure, handing it back. "And now what word did Solomon send by you?"

"He said that he and Redfern had a very important engagement for to-night and, as he couldn't find any of the boys about, he asked us to come. He wants you to bring your prisoners at once to the saloon. He said to start with them right away so you could get there before daylight. Guard them well and I expect it would be a good idea to tie them. How many men have you here now?"

"Only six!" McClure answered. "Don't see whar all the boys air that the boss couldn't find 'em. Over a dozen went to town this evenin'."

Polly trembled for the success of her plans as McClure made this statement.

Her fears, however, were wholly unnecessary. McClure was a little thick-headed and did not for a moment question the genuineness of the command.

"We'll have ter stir around ef we git thar afore day!" he commented. "You kin ride back an' tell 'em to be ready for us. I'll have everything a travelin' in less'n ten minutes."

Polly feared to trust herself further. The nervous strain to which she had been subjected was terrible and her voice was already beginning to tremble.

She murmured a low "thank you," then

wheeled her horse and dashed up the canyon, followed by Lucy Redfern.

Neither spoke until the trail was reached.

"Do you think he will bring them?" Lucy asked, doubtfully.

"I know he will!" Polly answered tremulously. "That McClure is a considerable of a blockhead, although he imagines himself rather sharp. A little flattery and smooth talk will go a long way with such a man; and that's what I counted on when I proposed this trip."

The ride was resumed; and, after pushing forward for nearly an hour, they turned aside into some bushes.

"Is that you, Miss Polly?" came a low voice.

"Yes; everything's all right, Fagan. They'll be along after awhile. We rode a little fast and so got ahead of them. How many men have you?"

"Twenty of as good boys as you can scare up in Sierra City!" Fagan answered, rather proudly, as he came from his place of concealment behind a ridge of boulders.

"Almost enough to take the cave if they shouldn't come!" was Polly's comment.

"A rig'ment couldn't do that, I reckon, if it's the kind of place you say it is!" Fagan observed sagely. "Better git back among the rocks, so's to give us fightin' room."

The young women gladly obeyed and for a full half-hour the silence of death hung over the trail.

Then was heard the steady tramp of men's feet.

"They're comin'," said Fagan, clutching his revolver with a firmer hand. "The light in this pass ain't extra and you want to be careful how you sling your lead. 'Twouldn't do, you know, to down the wrong men."

Nearer and nearer came that trampling of feet. Then the road-agents, driving Peppermint and Grimshaw before them, swung around a bend in the trail.

There was a crash of firearms. McClure and one of his followers fell dead and the others, headed by Jimmy Sullivan, sought instant safety in flight.

Fagan darted from the bushes and severed the bonds of the captives.

"Whoopee!" yelled Peppermint, crazy with delight. "Ef this ain't the highest old circus I've struck yet! I s'picioned somethin' o' the kind when they ordered us to travel. Didn't allow it 'u'd come so soon, though. Whoopee-oo!"

He turned a summerset and wound up his extravagant demonstrations by grasping Fagan's hand and squeezing it until the tears stood in that worthy's eyes.

Grimshaw's quick ear had caught the sound of female voices and he at once plunged through the bushes in that direction.

A moment later he rather startled Miss Polly Pigeon by lifting her bodily in his arms and planting a resounding kiss on her ripe, red lips.

"If Lucy Redfern wasn't present I'd call you the dearest and bravest little woman in the world!" he cried rapturously.

CHAPTER XVI.

JOSH PEPPERMINT TO THE RESCUE.

THE threatened destruction of the Sierra Saloon aroused a desire for plunder in the miscreants who followed the fortunes of Jakie Solomon and the burning buildings were given up to ruthless looting.

Casks of spirits were rolled into the street, broken to pieces and the contents consumed; many besotted creatures actually drinking the liquor from the filthy gutters where it collected in nauseous pools.

Mad from drink and glutted with plunder, Solomon's men became transformed into veritable devils; and when he, taking advantage of their condition, again raised the cry of "down with Cactus," they rushed in a body to the jail and with heavy beams of wood began battering at the doors.

Cactus, when placed in prison, had yielded up his weapons, at Hudson's request; and was consequently without means of defense, should the doors give way.

The guard which Hudson had placed about the jail had been driven back and dispersed.

Then a wild cry rolled up the street, electrifying all who heard it, and Fagan's band swept into view.

They were led by Josh Peppermint, who, with a revolver in either hand, guided his little burro with his knees.

Man and beast seemed alike transformed. No longer did the little brute crawl at a snail's pace. It dashed on at a rattling gait, keeping well in

advance of the horses ridden by Fagan's men. And Peppermint! There was an unwonted fire in his eyes. His ungainliness had disappeared. He sat on his diminutive steed like a born plainsman; and the cheer with which he encouraged his followers seemed a blast blown from a bugle.

Just at his heels rode Fagan and Grimshaw.

Lucy Redfern and Polly Pigeon had hurried to the shanty in which Redfern lay. They had been informed of his dangerous condition as soon as they reached the outskirts of the town.

Lucy remembered that, wicked though he was, he was her father, and her tears fell like rain. Polly's heart was also touched, for Redfern, after his own rough fashion, had shown her many kindnesses.

As the charging column swept up the narrow street, that was heated like a furnace from the encroaching fires, Solomon placed himself at the head of the jail-besiegers and prepared to repel the assault.

The jail was surrounded by a low stone wall, formed of boulders piled loosely upon top of each other, forming magnificent breastworks, and behind this he placed his men.

As Fagan's party, led by Peppermint, rushed by, the followers of Percy Hudson joined it.

Like a whirlwind the combined forces dashed up the narrow street, their thunderous cheers rising high above the demoniac yells of Solomon's adherents.

Then came the scattering pop, pop, of revolvers, followed by a crash of Winchesters. For one moment the assailants wavered. Then the voice of Peppermint rung out like the roar of a lion and, with hat gone and hair floating free, he spurred his little burro at the low stone wall.

Fagan and Grimshaw schoed his shout and imitated his example, and the column of horse and foot dashed madly at the barricade.

The burro took the wall like an English hunter and instantly the fight became hand to hand.

Solomon's drunken rabble had no stomach for such close and deadly work and at once fell back and scattered.

Seeing that the game was lost Solomon vaulted upon a horse and sought to escape by flight.

With a single bound he gained the street and dashed into the sea of flame which now roared through it.

Peppermint abandoned his burro and, leaping on a horse that had been rendered riderless by a bullet, hurried in pursuit.

The fire blinded and scorched him, but he forced his way through it. The flames terrified and maddened the brute and once beyond them it tore on at terrific speed.

Solomon was turning into the Pan-out trail, doubtless with the intention of seeking refuge in the hills, where a search for him would be almost useless; and Peppermint spurred his steed into a still more furious gait, with the hope of overtaking the fleeing villain before he could reach their shelter.

The Jew glanced back over his shoulder and a look of terror overspread his swarthy face, as he saw Peppermint thundering after him.

A stern chase is proverbially a long one, and Peppermint, realizing this and fearing that Solomon might eventually escape in spite of his utmost efforts, drew his revolver and began firing at the horse.

It seemed a pity to shoot the nobler brute of the two and it was not without a qualm that Peppermint brought himself to consent to it. He might have brought down Solomon as easily as the steed that bore him; but that appeared too much like murder, and besides he wanted to take him alive.

As the first shot rung out Solomon commenced belaboring his horse with his sound fist, and shouting at the top of his voice to increase the animal's speed. But his exertions availed him nothing, for the next shot brought the horse down with a broken leg. Solomon was thrown forward as from a catapult, and his head striking a stone, he rolled into the middle of the trail, insensible and apparently lifeless.

Peppermint sent a ball through the brain of the wounded animal as he came up, and then turned his attention to Solomon. The rascal possessed a hard head, and was only stunned, and when he came to himself five minutes later, he found himself bound tight and fast and weaponless.

Peppermint was seated on a rock a few feet away, eying him curiously.

"Vot is id you vant ofe me?" whined the Jew, thoroughly broken in spirit.

"Thet's a funny question, naow, considerin'

thet it comes frum yeou!" Peppermint observed, with a bland smile. "I expect to take yeou back tew taown, and, after yeou've had a fair trial, I hope to have the pleasure o' seein' yeou hung for the murder of Reddy Redfern."

"Retvern is nod de't!" Solomon protested. "Unt if he vas I tidn't naf no hant in his murder."

"Sing thet tew the hills, will yeou? Yeou stabbed Reddy Redfern, thinkin' it was Capt'in Cactus."

"Do yeou know I've a good mind tew plug yeou fer thet?"

Peppermint's voice grew stern and his fingers closed convulsively around the butt of his revolver.

The change in his demeanor thoroughly frightened the Jew, who shrunk back against the rock, his face plainly betraying his fear.

"I'll do it, tew, ef yeou don't speak up mighty peart."

"Naow, who does this yer Calamity Mine belong tew?"

Solomon twisted uneasily and seemed on the point of refusing to answer.

"I ton'd know nottings apowet id!" he muttered doggedly.

"Oh, yes yeou do!" Peppermint persisted. "Yeou know all about it. Come, I don't want no foolishness. I know thet yeou know who the reg'lar owner o' the Calamity Mine is. I could tell yeou; but yeou're the one thet's on the witness-stand."

"Ag'in, who is the owner o' the Calamity Mine?"

"Mordimer Dracy, ofe New York!" replied Solomon, promptly enough now that he saw it would not be safe longer to refuse.

"Mortimer Tracy, of New York. Correct, at the fu'st tryin'."

"Naow, what interest did Redfern have in it?"

"He vos t'e achent unt manacher."

"Hit the bull's-eye ag'in, plum-center. Naow, shall I tell you the rest o' this interestin' little story?"

"Jakie Solomon, a gambler, murderer and leader o' road-agents, got in with Redfern and made him believe thet he could cheat Mortimer Tracy aout o' the mine. Tracy happened to be in Yurup at the time, and that seemed to make the matter easy."

"The income o' the mine fer nearly a year, amamountin' to a'most forty thousand dollars, was placed in bank to the credit o' Miss Lucy Redfern, though it does me good tew say thet thet young lady didn't s'picion anything wrong, fer her rascally daddy hed made her b'leve he'd bought the mine."

"False accaounts an' a statement thet the mine was failin' war sent to Tracy to kind o' quiet him; an' then Redfern tried to sell the hull aoutfit an' the property he had in Sierra City, intendin' tew skip."

"This yer' rascal I've been tellin' yeou about, Jakie Solomon, engineered the hull scheme, got up false deeds, done all the plottin' an' most o' the dirty work, an' expected tew git half the proceeds."

"Well, 'pears like he's run ag'in a stump; an' the chances air he'll have his neck stretched in consequence."

"It's a mighty interestin' little story, an' I'd like tew tell it all tew yeou, but I hain't got time naow. The boys 'll be waitin' tew see yeou, mebbe, an' we mustn't stay tew long away."

"So we'll mosey. I'll take these strings off'n yer feet, an' yeou kin trot along ahead. I'll watch aout thet yeou don't miss the trail."

"Vot inderest haf you in dis madder?" Solomon asked, as he dragged himself painfully to his feet, for the fall had shaken him up somewhat.

"Josh Peppermint jest naterally fell onto the right side," was the evasive reply. "Move on!"

Peppermint mounted as he gave the command, and, revolver in hand, forced the Jew to march in advance of him up the trail toward Sierra City.

After the defeat and flight of Solomon and his followers, a determined effort had been made to check the fire. The principal buildings on the main street, however, were already in flames and doomed. Some that were isolated were saved, and the fire was kept from spreading to the other streets.

The conflagration had lost much of its terror when Peppermint reached Sierra City with his prisoner; but the tumult had by no means subsided.

"Here he is!" yelled an excited miner, as Solomon appeared on the main street.

It was pretty generally known that he had started the fire, and a throng of maddened and desperate men quickly gathered around him.

"Hang him! hang him!" was heard on every side.

"Oh, mine ferry goot frients!" pleaded the Jew, his form trembling and his face revealing the abjectness of his terror. "I am an innocent man. You vould nod hank an innocent man, I am sure. You are so prafe unt so shen-erous dot I know you vould nod dink ofe any-ting wrong yoursellufs."

He fell on his knees and attempted to kiss the feet of the nearest.

"Back, gentlemen!" commanded Peppermint, the words and tones coming as a surprise to the men gathered there. "This is my prisoner. He goes into the jail and there he will stay until he has had a fair trial. The man who lays a finger on him does so at his peril."

The threatening crowd, though not without a good deal of grumbling and scowling on the part of the more determined, fell back, and Peppermint marched his prisoner to the little jail and saw him safely locked in the cell which Cactus had occupied only a short time before.

CHAPTER XVII. CONCLUSION.

THE fire had spent its force and the tumult in the streets was subsiding when Redfern opened his eyes and stared at his unfamiliar surroundings, in a bewildered way.

In the room were gathered most of the principal characters with which these pages have had to deal.

"I am dyin', doctor!" Redfern said, as he looked earnestly into the face of the surgeon, who bent anxiously over him. "No need to tell me different, for I know it."

His eyes again wandered about the room, resting longest on the faces of Lucy and Polly, who were weeping bitterly.

"It's a bad life I've led, doctor! Nobody knows it better'n I do. Seems to me something has always pulled me wrong, from the very first."

"When Polly, there, was almost a baby, I committed a crime that has worried me ever since."

"I kep' a little hotel, back East, and one night a man with a little girl two or three years old, come along and asked for lodgings. He signed his name Sydney Sheldon, and after supper I showed him to his room."

"He took sick in the night, from some cause or other, an' died inside of twenty-four hours. In lookin' through his valise I found ten thousand dollars in bank-notes. The devil tempted me. I changed his name on the register to Peter Pigeon. He was buried under that name an' I kep' the money; and, as I didn't know what else to do with her, I also kep' the little girl an' called her Polly."

"That was my first crime, an' many another has follered it. But, doctor, I never murdered a man! That's not much to claim credit for, after tryin' to kill Captain Cactus, but I don't want you to think I am all bad. I wouldn't have gone into that if it hadn't been for over-persuasion an' whisky."

"Five years ago I come to Sierra City an' got the place of manager an' general agent of the Calamity Mine. The owner paid well, an' was always kind to me. He was liberal in his dealin's, sendin' the checks for my wages promptly and never questionin' my accounts."

"It may seem a little sing'lar but it's a fact, that I never saw the man I was workin' for. I was hired because I was strongly recommended for the place, an' I can say that I honestly tried to do my duty an' not disapp'int the men that had recommended me."

"The mine paid well an' everything went along all right till the devil, in the shape of Jakie Solomon tempted me ag'in."

Redfern then related at length how Solomon had induced him to attempt to swindle his employer, Mortimer Tracy, and then sell the mine, and how at last, when driven to the wall, he had consented to the murder of Captain Cactus.

He went thoroughly into the details, already known to the reader, and in no instance tried to shield himself from the obloquy of his deeds.

The recital greatly excited and weakened him and, at its close, he was given a glass of wine to bolster his failing strength.

Peppermint's face had been working strangely and, as Redfern lay back exhausted he stepped into an adjoining room, returning a few moments later so completely transformed that his most intimate acquaintance would scarcely have recognized him.

Josh Peppermint was no longer the Pilgrim

from Pan-out, but a tall, handsome young man; and, attired in becoming clothing, presented a neat and most comely appearance.

He marched up to Polly Pigeon and to the intense astonishment of that young lady, deliberately folded her in his arms and planted a kiss on her rosy lips; then turning to the others, who were no less astonished, he said:

"Allow me to present to you my sister, Margaret Sheldon, better known as Polly Pigeon. My real name is Sydney Sheldon. I was named for my father, with the particulars of whose death Mr. Redfern has just made us acquainted."

"When I came to Sierra City, only a few days ago, I had no expectation of making such a discovery, although in my line of work a man must always be prepared for surprises."

"The resemblance Polly Pigeon bore to the picture of my mother led me to investigate the matter. I did not then know that I ever had a sister; but I proceeded on the theory that Polly was at least a relative. As I couldn't leave here I put the telegraph to work and employed a brother detective to look into the case. He gave it his immediate attention and I to-day received his report."

"When my father and my twin sister, Margaret, so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared, they were on their way West, where father intended to invest the money he had with him. He took Margaret along, intending, before his return, to visit some relatives who had expressed a great desire to see her."

"The blow of their disappearance completely prostrated mother. She spent our small fortune in an unavailing search and a year later died of a broken heart, leaving me to be reared among strangers."

"I was so young that what knowledge I had of these events faded completely from my memory; and as the people who brought me up lived in a different part of the country and probably knew nothing of the matter, I was, until to-day, ignorant of this portion of my infantile history. The missing links in my friend's report have just been supplied by Mr. Redfern."

A gasping cry came from the lips of the dying man. Drawn by this strange revelation he had attempted to raise himself in the bed that he might look on the face of Sydney Sheldon's son.

The effort resulted in a renewal of the hemorrhages that had already so weakened him.

He sunk at once into unconsciousness; and a few minutes later the soul of Reddy Redfern took its flight to answer for its misdeeds at that bar where our weakness, as well as our sins, is held in everlasting remembrance.

It was a solemn moment and all hearts were touched and softened.

The young detective's narrative was brought to an abrupt close; and Lucy Redfern and Margaret Sheldon were led away weeping.

It was nearly a week before Sydney Sheldon found an opportunity to continue his revelations.

The men slain in the street fight had been given decent burial, and kindly hands had also laid Reddy Redfern to rest.

The same persons were present on this occasion, and they were gathered in a room of the plank hotel, that had been hastily erected on the ruins of the Sierra Saloon.

"That gentleman," said Sheldon, pointing to Captain Cactus, "is the rightful owner of the Calamity Mine, Mortimer Tracy."

A murmur of astonishment followed this declaration, and congratulations were showered so profusely on the whilom captain that he seemed on the point of flight.

"And this gentleman is Mr. Frederick Tracy, Mortimer Tracy's son!"

Sheldon tapped Grimshaw on the shoulder as he made this second declaration.

"And now I believe my revelations are at an end."

"Friends," said Mortimer Tracy, rising with flushed face, "Mr. Sheldon is altogether too modest. But for him it is not likely we would be so well situated as we are to-day. He has told you that he is a detective, and as such he entered my employ. He originated the plans that have resulted so successfully. Under his direction I came here in advance of him as Captain Cactus, the Chaparral Cock, and my son came as Grimshaw, the notary."

"It would have been an easy matter, no doubt, to have arrested Redfern for embezzling the earnings of the mine and to have secured his conviction."

"I was convinced from the start, however, that Redfern was not the principal mover in the scheme to dispossess me, and Sheldon agreed

with me in this conclusion. Certain peculiarities about Redfern's later reports, their elaborateness and nicety of detail and the special pleading with which they were filled satisfied me that the guiding and controlling mind belonged to a more daring and cunning villain than Redfern."

"To reveal this scoundrel, to tear him from his place of concealment behind Redfern and mete out to him the punishment justly his due was the task to which we applied ourselves."

"All our efforts were directed to this end; and it required great caution and skill to so lay our nets in the sight of the bird that it should not take the alarm, but should become entrapped in them."

"The plans and details by which this was consummated were devised by Mr. Sheldon, and he shall have due credit for them."

"My purchase of the building adjoining the Sierra Saloon, and the opening of Peppermint's pawnshop, were for the purpose of putting us in easy communication with each other and with the man we came to shadow."

"The pawnbroker's business was chosen in preference to another because Sheldon fancied that so great a rascal as we believed the unknown to be was probably engaged in other species of robbery, and some evidences of that fact might drift into such an establishment."

"The pretended attempt to purchase the mine and the securing of the copies of those forged deeds, were parts of his plan to induce the unknown to come to the front in some manner. It was hoped that, by arousing his fears and suspicions, he might be induced to commit some overt act that would identify and convict him—as he did finally in his effort on my life."

"Sheldon spotted Solomon at once as the man we were after, and by shadowing his movements discovered the secret cave. In his attempt to release my son, he failed, but the failure worked no disaster. The two being held captive resulted in the attempted assassination. This attempt revealed everything at a single blow; and in it Heaven was plainly the avenger."

"The successful accomplishment of this very delicate and difficult undertaking, and the singular discovery of a sister of whose existence even he had no knowledge, are a pair of happy circumstances which I think I may not inappropriately term JOSH PEPPERMINT'S DOUBLE STRIKE."

This story is near its close.

Jakie Solomon was duly tried for the murder of Reddy Redfern and sentenced to hard labor for life, and to-day the arch-scoundrel is serving the State as shoemaker in the great State's Prison.

Mortimer Tracy resumed possession of his own; and, adopting the West as his home, became one of its most honored and useful citizens, distributing his wealth with that broad liberality which so well became him.

Frederick Tracy and pretty Margaret Sheldon are married. He is now a rising attorney and their lives are as happy as the days are long.

Lucy Redfern comforted herself with a handsome wedding portion from Mortimer Tracy and Percy Hudson for a husband.

And, as for Sydney Sheldon, the inimitable and lovable Josh Peppermint, he pursues his chosen calling with his old-time zeal and is a terror to villains of low and high degree.

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